

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: A PECULIAR FAITH:
NAVIGATING ROUSSEAU’S ROAD TO
DEMOCRATIC VIRTUE

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The relationship between religion and politics poses a pressing—and oftentimes combustible—problem for contemporary democracies. The terror of September 11th, global suicide bombings, and attacks on America’s abortion clinics illustrate the imminent dangers of political protest driven by fanatical faith. But authors such as Machiavelli, Tocqueville and, more recently, William Galston and Manning Marable suggest something different. Religion, they argue, cultivates virtue amongst citizens and must be incorporated into the pluralist fold.

These dissonant conclusions underscore the difficulty of navigating the tension between spiritual and secular values. Does religion subvert liberal democratic principles of neutrality and equality under law, or does it offer an essential foundation for secular virtue? If religion provides a moral compass compatible with democracy, do religious systems inevitably undermine open, participatory politics? If so, how might we cultivate political virtue without compromising strong citizenship?

For Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the answer lies in Civil Religion, a model wherein spiritual virtue and religious piety uphold political liberty and strong citizenship. Does Rousseau ask too much? Does he attempt to marry irreconcilable partners, or is his vision practicable and persuasive? Adopting the divisive relationship between religion and politics as its central concern, *A Peculiar Faith* examines Rousseau's secular theology as a means of confronting this contentious and still-relevant dilemma.

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By

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Dedication

To Luka and Jan.

Acknowledgements

The sentences you are about to read are mine, but they would not have been written without the guidance and support of colleagues, friends and family. First and foremost, I owe tremendous gratitude to Benjamin R. Barber. I first met Dr. Barber in a Rousseau seminar at Rutgers University. When he accepted an offer to join the faculty at the University of Maryland, he graciously suggested that I accompany him. What, at the time, seemed a potentially brash gamble proved, in hindsight, to be the most significant decision of my academic career. I cannot thank Barber enough for his contributions to my personal and professional development, his generosity in funding my interests and supporting me at every turn, and his role as an educator, mentor and friend. I am as grateful for his warmth, insight, and encouragement, as I am for the passion with which he challenged, provoked, confronted and tested me. The work at hand is a testament to, and reflection of, our relationship.

If Barber was my fountainhead, several prepared me for his tutelage. My path to political theory began at Pomona College, and the blame (as it were) rests largely on the shoulders of John Seery. To this day, Seery remains a gadfly, a confidant, a compatriot, and one of the most influential professors with whom I have had the pleasure of studying. The same holds true for James Miller and Richard Shusterman. I happened across Miller's *Passion of Michel Foucault* while living in Oahu, and made the fruitful pilgrimage to New York to work with him at the New School. His commitment to my intellectual growth never wavered (even when I did), and I was fortunate to have benefited from his affection, erudition, scholarly rigor, and utter

lack of artifice. He taught me how to approach texts critically but independently, with a disciplined eye for precision that never sacrificed creativity. Shusterman proved a particularly empathetic ally as well. Sensitive to my interests, strengths and weaknesses alike, he treated me as an equal and exposed me to an art of life towards which I continue to humbly, and hopefully, aspire.

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Finally, these acknowledgments would be woefully incomplete without a recognition of Janet Austin. Harboring a graduate student is no mean feat, particularly in my case. At times I would have been hard-pressed to find my way out of a paper bag, let alone write a coherent work. Yet throughout it all, Janet provided not merely encouragement and affection, but also grounding, focus, strength, and the wellsprings of her tremendous organizational skills. When I drifted off into sermons on the Pelagian heresy, she reminded me of the task at hand; when I suggested fleeing to Paris, she kept me at my computer in Brooklyn, plugging ahead; and whenever the goal seemed beyond my capacities, she insisted otherwise. It is with love and admiration that I dedicate *A Peculiar Faith* to her.

Brooklyn, New York

November 8, 2004

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Note on Translation

Rather than recreating the wheel, and for the sake of consistency, translations of Rousseau's works are largely based upon the wonderful University Press of New England series, *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*. I have only occasionally found need to make corrections (based upon the Pléiade edition), or draw attention to nuances particular to the French language. All other translations are mine, unless noted.

List of Abbreviations

In French

- OC** *Oeuvres complètes, tomes 1-5.* Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, eds. (Paris: Éditions Gallimard/Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1959-1995).
- CC** *Correspondance complète de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, R.A. Leigh, ed. (Genève: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1965—)

In Translation

- CW** *The Collected Writings of Rousseau, Vols. 1-10.* Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, eds. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1990-2004).
- E** *Emile, or On Education*, Allan Bloom, tr. (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

Introduction

Rousseau touched the hearts of a great many people who felt the author spoke directly to them.¹ Yet the reputation of his works is dogged by their perceived contradictions. Rousseau vehemently rejected such charges, even as he admitted to the paradoxical nature of his thought. If the temperamental author had his way, readers would surely follow the fictional Frenchman's lead in his *Dialogues* and recognize his *oeuvres* as "things that were profoundly thought out, forming a coherent system which might not be true but which offered nothing contradictory."² Rousseau's insistent claims notwithstanding, his writings strike inharmonious chords. Of these, perhaps none rings more awkwardly than his simultaneous embrace of religiosity and secularism.

Writing as if attuned to the means of salvation, Rousseau incorporated both Christian and Pagan traditions within a vision of strong democratic citizenship and corporeal improvement. How did these competing influences unfold as a model of practicable reform? Was their synthesis compelling? Or even coherent? What might we make of Rousseau's religious conviction, and its relation to civic harmony and political virtue? And for a thinker so obviously concerned with secular affairs, why was religion necessary to his thought?

¹ See: Robert Darnton, "Readers Respond to Rousseau: The Fabrication of Romantic Sensitivity," in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*. (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

² In claiming both that his works "offered nothing contradictory" and that paradox was "necessary" to his thought, Rousseau forced a crucial distinction between paradox and inconsistency discussed in Chapter 2 above. *Dialogues*. CW I.209; OC I.930.

Because Rousseau's writings are rife with paradoxes and antinomies, answers do not come easily. Indeed, his efforts have conspicuously divided audiences. In Rousseau's own age, Frederick the Great believed that the Genevan's moral rigor was matched only by his saint-like self-castigation.³ Yet the Archduke Christophe de Beaumont derided him as a dangerous heretic, the living epitome of Saint Paul's prophecy of "perilous days" destined to cloud mankind's future.⁴ To most—his friends, foes, and intellectual peers alike—Rousseau was a rabble-rouser cut of Diogenes the Cynic's abrasive cloth. Yet to himself, he was one of the last few true Christians, believers who followed the gospel of Christ rather than the Church's dictates.

Was Jean-Jacques pious or profane, a disciple of Jesus or a radical Pagan upstart? Evidence suggests that each of these descriptions bears some measure of truth. Deeply engaged with the corporeal world as critic and reformer, he drew a paradoxical faith in the capacity for human redemption from a heterodox assumption of man's natural goodness. Applying virulent social criticism to an optimistic vision of political reform, he rose to fame as a demonstrative recluse—a thinker ill-at-ease in the society to whose improvement he was so deeply committed. Such engagement reflects wholly secular concerns, yet Rousseau's work also betrayed strong religiosity. His faith in human innocence rested upon a self-professed love of divine order and the natural world of God's creation. From his very first *Discourse*, to the Vicar's *Profession*, to the final *Reveries*, Rousseau urged us to follow the principles

³ For a detailed discussion of Frederick's claim, see Chapter 4 below.

⁴ *Pastoral Letter*. CW IX.3. Beaumont's Biblical reference is to 2 *Timothy* 3:1-4, 8.

of virtue “engraved in all hearts” and revealed through the God-given conscience from which socialized man had alienated himself.

One of his epoch’s most virulent anti-Clericalists, Rousseau nonetheless embraced religion as a necessary foundation for individual and collective improvement. Yet his vision of piety rested upon a Pelagian heresy, a claim of ontological innocence that was itself colored by a profound mistrust of human society. A self-designated recluse, he expressed personal distaste for social obligation, duty and convention. A champion of cohesive communities, he found peace only in solitude, alone amongst nature while lost in his passionate reveries. Perhaps the greatest social critic of his age, he staked his career—and following his motto,⁵ his very life—on a mission of public service: pursuing the truth and revealing it to his peers. Yet this secular calling was itself the fruit borne of a spiritual conversion, an epiphany that changed his life on the road to Vincennes.

Such are the beds of Rousseau’s making, and the conspicuously strange bedfellows he conjured. Taken together, his skepticism of men (as social creatures infected with amour-propre) and faith in man (*en générale*, as creations of God endowed with conscience) appear to be incompatible. Rousseau’s sunny view of human nature seems ill-fitted with his belief in Divine order and an afterlife, two concepts traditionally used to literally instill the fear of God in the descendents of Adam. His acute distrust of formal religion only complicates matters. If man is good and religion is necessary, yet men have grown as wicked and corrupt as religious institutions, can we honestly hope for improvement? What concrete lesson

⁵ Namely, *Vitam impendere vero* (*Dedicate life to truth*). For a more thorough examination of Rousseau’s motto see Chapter 2 below.

might we draw from these inchoate conclusions? Can such a dissonant theory materialize in practice?

Again, Rousseau's readers harbored strong doubts. Even those who appreciated his work have wished aloud that the Genevan abandon his dialectic approach for a more singular methodology and agenda. If only Rousseau had chosen a more righteous path unencumbered by earthly affairs, perhaps he would have survived the Enlightenment as one of the world's great martyrs, a figure deified without irony or scorn. Infighting with the *philosophes*, repentant success, hypersensitivity over his reputation and legacy, and eventual exile only heightened his discomfort and fueled his critics; yet he never relinquished his burdensome commitment to corporeal reform.

Rousseau was, after all, equally enamored with spiritual and secular improvement. To abandon one would have been to destroy the provocative dialectic that makes his thought so compelling. Had he convincingly renounced his ties to the world, the questions that now confront us would be irrelevant. He would not have struggled to envision religious associations compatible with liberal democratic principles of tolerance, equality and strong citizenship. He would not, in other words, have formulated his theory of Civil Religion.

Civil Religion is a nexus of Rousseau's earthly and otherworldly concerns. One of his most widely-disparaged writings, this attempt to found a "purely civil faith" (a term which itself testifies to his confluence of spiritual and secular values) marked a culminating point in Rousseau's life-consuming quest to foster religious and political reform. In it, we find an author struggling to apply his faith to practice,

to reconcile his dour view of the world as it *was* with his dream of society as it *should be*.⁶ In the end, was he successful? Were his apparently competing influences and aims irreconcilable? Or does Rousseau offer a powerful lens through which to reconsider the relationship between religion and politics?

* * * * *

Readers may yet ask, why another book about Rousseau? Although the topic of his religiosity has been long-studied, I believe it could be *better* studied. After all, the most thorough and widely-acclaimed writings are both aged and unavailable in English: P.-M. Masson and William Cuendet wrote nearly one century ago, while comparable works from renowned scholars such as Robert Dérathe and Pierre Burgelin date from the middle of the twentieth-century.⁷

To be fair, contemporary authors have expanded upon these pioneering efforts. James Miller and Helena Rosenblatt discussed Rousseau's relationship to Protestantism in illuminating the significance of his Swiss heritage.⁸ In *Not By Reason Alone*, Joshua Mitchell explored the influence of Christian and Protestant

⁶ This is, of course, a reference to *The Social Contract's* opening lines: "I want to inquire whether there can be a legitimate and reliable rule of administration in the civil order, taking men as they *are* and laws as they *can be*." As we will see, this dialectic between realism and idealism is central to Rousseau's religious and political thought alike. *The Social Contract*. CW IV.131; OC III.351. (My emphasis.)

⁷ See: Pierre-Maurice Masson, *La Religion de J. J. Rousseau*, Vols. I-III. (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1916); William Cuendet, *La Philosophie religieuse de Jean-Jacques Rousseau et ses sources*. (Geneva: A. Jullien, 1913); Robert Dérathe, *Le rationalisme de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948); Pierre Burgelin, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la religion de Genève*. (Geneva: Éditions Labor et Fides, 1962).

⁸ See: James Miller, *Rousseau: Dreamer of Democracy*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Helena Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva: From the First discourse to the Social Contract, 1749-1762*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

authors upon his thought.⁹ Ann Hartle's eloquent work, *The Modern Self in Rousseau's Confessions*,¹⁰ analyzed the Augustinian elements within his model of self-discovery, a connection likewise detailed by Christopher Brooke¹¹ and Christopher Kelly.¹² Victor Gourevitch¹³ drew attention to Rousseau's providential description of "nature," while Ronald Grimsley¹⁴ expounded upon his Biblical concept of redemption. And Patrick Riley's well-documented *The General Will Before Rousseau* illustrated the Malebranchian influence upon his concept of voluntarism, while charting the general will's movement from a divine to a civic emphasis.¹⁵

Despite the breadth and depth of such scholarship, however, rarely is Rousseau's religion considered as a keystone to his political vision, and a crucial linkage which unites his entire *oeuvres*.¹⁶ Quite the contrary, far more effort has been

⁹ Mitchell goes so far as to claim that "Rousseau and Luther embark on identical projects" of social criticism. Joshua Mitchell, *Not By Reason Alone: Religion, History and Identity in Early Modern Political Thought*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

¹⁰ See: Ann Hartle, *The Modern Self in Rousseau's Confessions: A Reply to Saint Augustine*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

¹¹ Christopher Brooke, "Rousseau's Political Philosophy: Stoic and Augustinian Origins," in Patrick Riley, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹² Christopher Kelly, *Rousseau's Exemplary Life: The "Confessions" as Political Philosophy*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

¹³ Victor Gourevitch, "The Religious Thought," in Riley.

¹⁴ Ronald Grimsley, *Rousseau and the Religious Quest*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

¹⁵ Patrick Riley, *The General Will Before Rousseau: The Transformation of the Divine into the Civic*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

¹⁶ Instead, scholars often look for ways to subvert or disprove Jean-Jacques' claim of consistency. The most compelling example of this approach is Judith Shklar's *Men and Citizens*. Shklar argued forcefully that Rousseau was a deeply pessimistic thinker whose vision of secular redemption—of cultivating men *and* citizens—was, by his own admission and example, fatally flawed. With due respect, I believe that Shklar subverts his significant and sincere optimism (a value tied to his religiosity) by exaggerating the extent and implications of his pessimism. Yet Rousseau's writings did not fall into the category of philosophical speculation he so loathed; he meant his vision to be implemented in practice. We should, however, note that not all authors follow Shklar's skeptical lead. As much as anyone, Jean Starobinski struggled to identify the underlying coherence of Rousseau's work. In *La transparence et l'obstacle*, he noted the simultaneous piety and profanity that characterized the Genevan's morality, without taking this as evidence of his inconsistency. This work is therefore in part an attempt to flesh out Starobinski's claim, to determine where exactly Rousseau's opposed values coalesced within his singular vision of democratic virtue. See: Judith N. Shklar, *Men*

made to use his concept of religion *against* him: to argue that his spiritual optimism is fundamentally incoherent and incompatible with his political vision; that his Civil Religion reveals a despotic, totalitarian temperament; and that his conversions from Protestantism to Catholicism back to Protestantism attest to his capricious nature.¹⁷

A fresh perspective is needed, one which defends Rousseau from these claims by clarifying the significance of his religiosity, particularly as it informs a coherent model of democratic virtue. Towards this end, we will explore the Pagan and Christian traditions evident in concepts central to his life and writings; examine his more contentious theological beliefs, particularly his sorely overlooked Pelagianism, his proclamations of Christian faith, and his self-defense against the charges of heresy brought against *Emile*; and explore how his simultaneous piety and profanity shapes a compelling vision of political reform.

Drawing upon previous efforts, considerable space will be devoted to textual, historical, and biographical analysis. We will also take seriously the abundant misgivings put forth by Rousseau's critics, and broach the question of his consistency and coherence from the outset. In addition to addressing oft-overlooked figures (both Pagan and Christian alike) crucial to fleshing out the complexity of his faith, we will also explore Rousseau's more neglected writings: the many letters, fragments, and

and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau's Social Thought. (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*. Arthur Goldhammer, tr. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988). Originally published as *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La transparence et l'obstacle suivi de Sept essais sur Rousseau*. (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1971).

¹⁷ See: J. L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*. (London: Martin Secker & Warburg, Ltd., 1952); Lester G. Crocker, *Rousseau's Social Contract*. (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1968); Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); J. H. Huizinga, *Rousseau: The Self Made Saint*. (New York: Viking Press, 1976); Arthur M. Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau's Thought*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

minor works that supplement his (in)famous chapters *On Civil Religion* and the *Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Vicar*. Finally, we will examine Civil Religion as the practical realization of Rousseau's religious and secular convictions, before concluding on the very path where he claimed his career began: the road to Vincennes, where a life-changing revelation pressed him to serve both God and man.

Although we begin by introducing politico-theological relations as a tension still-relevant (perhaps more than ever) to democratic theory, this is not a work of public policy. It makes no claim to provide programmatic solutions to the contentious relationship between religion and politics, nor even explicitly apply Rousseau's writings to contemporary problems. Nor, for that matter, is it an attempt to draw linear relations between the Genevan and his Christian and Pagan forebears. It rather suggests that Rousseau offers valuable insight into the relationship between religion and politics; that his secular thought cannot be understood without reference to his views on religion; and that his connection to such disparate figures as Augustine and Pelagius, Diogenes and Saint Antony, Hobbes and Saint Paul, clarifies the roots, innovations, and implications of Rousseau's peculiar¹⁸ faith. By examining these inchoate influences, we may determine why Rousseau lauded religion yet was so critical of religious dogmatism; why he was condemned as a heretic, despite insisting upon his piety; and how his radical faith in man and God alike informed a distinctly political vision of virtue with decidedly religious undertones. In the end, by reconciling Rousseau's uncompromising amalgam of spiritual and secular traditions,

¹⁸ According to *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), the term *peculiar* has two senses equally applicable to Rousseau's faith: particular to him, and highly unusual.

we will be poised not only to explain the necessity of religion to his thought, but also glean a coherent political lesson from its role in the path to civic virtue.

Chapter 1: Strained Relations

On February 11, 1906, Pope Pius X unleashed an eloquent fury on the French government. The object of his wrath was *La Loi concernant la séparation des Églises et de l'État* (December 9, 1905), which instituted a formal separation between church and state in France. In an elaborate Encyclical entitled *Vehementer Nos*, Pius condemned the legislation on moral, political, practical and legal grounds, levying the following censure on behalf of the Vatican:

We do, by virtue of the supreme authority which God has confided to Us ... reprove and condemn the law voted in France for the separation of Church and State, as deeply unjust to God whom it denies, and as laying down the principle that the Republic recognizes no cult. We reprove and condemn it as violating the natural law, the law of nations, and fidelity to treaties; as contrary to the Divine constitution of the Church, to her essential rights and to her liberty; as destroying justice and trampling underfoot the rights of property which the Church has acquired by many titles and, in addition, by virtue of the Concordat. We reprove and condemn it as gravely offensive to the dignity of the Apostolic See, to Our own person, to the Episcopacy, and to the clergy and all the Catholics of France. Therefore, We protest solemnly and with all Our strength against the introduction, the voting and the promulgation of this law, declaring that it can never be alleged against the imprescriptible rights of the Church.” (§13)¹⁹

Amongst his many specific charges, he concluded that French legislators were “guilty of a great injustice to God” (§3). Evoking Augustine’s *City of God*, he argued that the separation sabotaged the state’s “ultimate object which is man’s eternal happiness after this short life shall have run its course.” (§3) Such disregard “inflicts great injury on society itself, for it cannot either prosper or last long when due place is not

¹⁹ All section numbers refer to: *Vehementer Nos*, Encyclical of Pope Pius X, promulgated on February 11, 1906. All quotes are taken from the official Vatican translation.

left for religion, which is the supreme rule and the sovereign mistress in all questions touching the rights and the duties of men.” (§3) The ruling betrayed a nation’s ungratefulness, as France had been “during the course of centuries the object of... great and special predilection on the part of the [Roman Catholic Church].” (§4) It constituted a breach of international treaty law by unceremoniously revoking the bilateral Concordat between the Roman Pontiff and the French Government. (§5) *La Loi* also subverted a Papal hierarchy rooted in both divine and natural law, placing “the Church under the domination of the civil power” (§7), and assigning “the administration and the supervision of public worship... to an association formed of laymen,” provisions which “seriously violate the rights of the Church, and are in opposition with her Divine constitution.” (§8)

Labeling the legislation “an event of the gravest import, and one that must be deplored by all the right-minded, for it is as disastrous to society as it is to religion,” Pius admitted that “it is an event which surprised nobody who has paid any attention to the religious policy followed in France of late years.” (§1) Indeed, though *La Loi* stands as the legal foundation of France’s separation between church and state, its inception marked the culmination of a hundred-year movement towards strict secularism. A process which began in 1792 during the short-lived First Republic, the subsequent century saw a series of legislation which instituted a civil code (1804) and civil marriage mandates (1810), abolished an 1814 law prohibiting work on Sundays and holidays (1880), and barred public prayers before parliamentary sessions (1884). During this period, France also secularized its schools and hospitals, enlisted clerics in military service, banished Catholic practices and emblems from all public

establishments, and removed religious references from its judicial oath. The 1905 law formally upheld the spirit of these measures, reasserting on no uncertain terms what had been a central theme of post-Jacobin politics: “La République assure la liberté de conscience.”²⁰ The official separation of church and state, codified at the start of the twentieth century, was deemed essential to protecting this liberty. By prohibiting federal support of religious institutions, the ruling broadly denounced preferential treatment towards any one particular faith; *égalité*, as much as *liberté*, was the law’s guiding spirit.

It was not without concern, then, that a debate of some consequence began in France in the early days of 2003. On January 17, according to *Le Monde*, Secretary of State Pierre Bédier and government spokesman Jean-François Copé announced unequivocally that *la Loi de 1905* was sorely in need of reform.²¹ The catalysts to this claim were the September 11, 2001 destruction of the World Trade Center, subsequent bombings conducted by the Al Qaeda network, and a correlative fear of future fundamentalist violence. As justification for his proposal, Bédier drew an explicit connection between the dangers posed by Islamic extremism today and Catholicism one hundred years prior: “In 1905, the government thought that Catholics were anti-republican, and constituted a menace as such. Today, Islam poses a similar problem. It would be unrealistic to ignore this concern.”²²

At heart of this debate are anxieties associated with the foreign financing of Muslim mosques. Although *la Loi* explicitly prohibits public sponsorship of houses

²⁰ *La Loi concernant la séparation des Eglises et de l’Etat*, Article 1. Promulgated on July 3, 1905 with 314 votes for, 233 against.

²¹ “Faut-il réviser la loi de séparation des Eglises et de l’Etat?” *Le Monde*, January 17, 2003.

²² *Ibid.*, *Le Monde*, January 17, 2003.

of worship (a practice sometimes circumvented by partitions which establish ‘non-prayer’ areas), there is growing concern that mosques are financed by persons or organizations with terrorist ties or sympathies; that they might either serve as covert terrorist communities, or distribute laundered funds to extremist cells within France; and that state subsidization could effectively limit the amount of suspicious capital entering from abroad. Alluding to both an “Islamic league” and unspecified Saudi sources as possible perpetrators, Bédier cited the need for “extreme vigilance” in regulating money arriving from ill-intentioned “foreign powers.”²³ An “Islam of France,” he argued, must supplant “Islam *in* France”—the religion must be sponsored and regulated by the government, and not merely allowed to infiltrate the nation’s borders.²⁴

Leaving aside the logic of this argument and the vagueness of its targets, the proposal is radical: the state must oversee the affairs of one specific creed.²⁵ To monitor mosques and prevent the laundering of “terrorist” funds, France must first reform a hard-fought hallmark of its democracy (the strict separation of church and state). To protect republican virtues, Bédier and Copé argue, they must revise a paradigmatic republican law. Whereas in 1905 similar fears of Catholicism inspired a strict separation of church and state, misgivings about Muslimism are now prompting the French government to reconsider its abstention.

²³ “Bédier souhaite un ‘islam de France’ et non plus un ‘islam en France.’” *Agence France-Presse*, January 23, 2003.

²⁴ If Bédier’s distinction is not terribly clear, we might consider it in relation to Rousseau, who was a man *in* Paris but never considered himself a man *of* Paris. Ibid. (My emphasis.)

²⁵ It is worth noting that this charge takes issue with the church (or, more precisely, the Mosque), and not the religious practice itself.

The seeds for such revisionism had already been planted five years prior, when, on October 7, 1998, the National Assembly unanimously approved *Décret n° 98-890*. The decree instituted *mission interministérielle de lutte contre les sectes* (MILS), an interdepartmental effort which “incites public services to take, in respect of public liberties, appropriate measures to anticipate and combat sects who undermine personal human dignity or who threaten the public order.”²⁶ Under the auspices of civic welfare—to “inform the public of the dangers posed by the sectarian phenomenon”—the French government established an agency to officially monitor religious factions.²⁷

These are striking examples of a democratic nation rethinking the interstices of religion and politics, but not isolated ones. On December 12, 2002, George W. Bush passed a unilateral Executive Order entitled “Equal Protection of the Laws for Faith-based and Community Organizations.” This so-called “Faith-based initiative” entitled religious groups to receive federal tax dollars for “social service programs”—those which provide “services directed at reducing poverty, improving opportunities for low-income children, revitalizing low-income communities, empowering low-income families and low-income individuals to become self-sufficient, or otherwise

²⁶ “Décret n° 98-890 du 7 octobre 1998 instituant une *mission interministérielle de lutte contre les sectes*.” Taken from: Journal Officiel N° 234, du 9 Octobre 1998, page 15286.

²⁷ Earlier in the same year, the United States passed the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 “To express United States foreign policy with respect to, and to strengthen United States advocacy on behalf of, individuals persecuted in foreign countries on account of religion.” According to the subsequent “International Religious Freedom Report of 2002” released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, religious groups in France “continued to be concerned about the possible impact of [recent] legislation passed,” although “no overall change in the status of respect for religious freedom” was noted. See: “International Religious Freedom Act of 1998” (H.R. 2431), and the U.S. Department of State “International Religious Freedom Report 2002: France.”

helping people in need.”²⁸ Immediately condemned by *The New York Times* as being “unconstitutional, and fundamentally unfair,” and running “counter to decades of First Amendment law, which holds that government dollars cannot be used to promote religion,” the initiative has nonetheless garnered support from citizens of all faiths who cite the growing need for spiritual guidance amongst charitable organizations.²⁹

If the separation of church and state offers an essential foundation of a strong, pluralist democracy, then the new millennium has begun on an ominous note. In very different manners and for very different reasons, two of the world’s leading democratic powers are redrawing the boundaries between secular and spiritual institutions. In part, such revisionism is a sign of the times. Since September 11, 2001, ours has been a climate in which the ambiguous and ubiquitous use of the word “terrorist” has supplanted “communist” as this era’s primary antonym for democracy, and where terrorism is often conflated with Muslim fundamentalism. Yet amidst this atmosphere of mistrust, western nations have increasingly embraced another creed—Christianity—for guidance in social, moral, political, and educational reform.³⁰ If France has deemed Islam a potential threat to republican order and “public liberties,” the United States has approached faith-based groups as heretofore neglected sources

²⁸ George W. Bush, “Equal Protection of the Laws for Faith-based and Community Organizations.” Executive Order 13279 of December 12, 2002.

²⁹ “Using Tax Dollars for Churches.” *The New York Times*, December 30, 2002.

³⁰ Shortly after the World Trade Center attacks, British Prime Minister Tony Blair proposed increasing state-funding for religious schools as part of a New Labour Party plan to reform secondary education. Although roughly 7,000 of Britain’s 25,000 schools already have religious affiliations, the measure was in part seen as a means of luring middle class families—an increasing number of whom send children to privately financed schools—back to the public sector. More recently (in 2002), Polish president Aleksander Kwasniewski successfully solicited Pope John Paul II to raise public support for inclusion into the European Union, arguing that such an alliance would help to “restore Christian values in Western Europe.” See: “Tony and the little children” (*The Economist*, December 6, 2001); “Preaching for the European Union” (*The Economist*, March 14, 2002).

of “helping people in need.” Whether guided by skeptical mistrust or philanthropic idealism, such divergent positions and policies reveal a common conviction: democracies cannot ignore the civic significance (for better or worse) of religious associations. Furthermore, in both instances (and no matter the motives) the end result is similar: democratic states are increasingly involved in religious affairs.

Given these turns of events, we may well ask: was Nietzsche wrong? When the prophetic German foretold the death of God, when he heralded that “belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable,” had he spoken too soon?³¹ Ours is certainly an age of scientific rationalism and global capitalism, of a liberalism whose most visible ambassadors travel through television and film, music and internet lines. Pat Buchanan’s infamous “Culture War” speech and his Republican National Convention address of 1992 were both offensive and vitriolic, but were they *entirely* far-fetched?³² America *does* seem awash in the godless libertinism of popular culture; the nuclear family *is* a dying unit; we *are* increasingly tolerant, and *do* parade our sexual, ethnic and political diversity with pride rather than shame.

But ours is equally an age of religious resurgence, of Jihad and missionaries, of the sudden *integration* of church and state. According to *The Economist*, Millenarianism—the fundamentalist “belief in the thousand-year reign of King Jesus”—has appealed to broader audiences since September 11, a rise evidenced by both its popularity amongst conservative radio station audiences, and the soaring sales

³¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Walter Kaufmann, tr. (New York: Random House, Inc., 1974), §343, p. 279.

³² According to Buchanan, “There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself.” See: Patrick J. Buchanan, “1992 Republican National Convention Speech” (August 17, 1992). Similarly, in his speech entitled “The Cultural War for the Soul of America” (September 14, 1992), Buchanan asks: “Are we any longer ‘one nation under God,’ or has one-half of that nation already begun to secede from the other?”

of the bestselling evangelical novel series “Left Behind” which molds a message of Old Testament fire-and-brimstone fury to isolationist politics.³³ Even more centrally, membership in Christian churches exceeded two billion in the new millennium, a growth of roughly 1.2 billion over 30 years.³⁴ In America alone, the number of Christians have risen by over 200 percent in the past 50 years (to 171 million); membership in churches of all faiths now comprises over 60 percent of the population, or roughly twice what it was in the mid-nineteenth century. These circumstances should give us pause. Has the “cheerfulness” Nietzsche saw in a Europe released from the shadow of God already begun to fade, in both the Continent and the New World?

Clearly, Nietzsche’s assertion is debatable now, just as it was when written. In 1885, three years following the publication of the first edition of *The Gay Science*,³⁵ Pope Leo XIII described church-state relations in organic terms, arguing that “[t]here must ... exist between these two powers a certain orderly connection, which may be compared to the union of the soul and body in man.”³⁶ What the German reviled as a slavish specter haunting human livelihood, the Roman extolled as natural and necessary. What Nietzsche attacked as systematic self-inurement, Leo XIII lauded as both physically and spiritually healthy. Neither vision triumphed wholly. The relationship between religious and political institutions is *still* hotly

³³ The first book alone (of this as yet nine-book series) has sold over 7 million copies to date. See: Lexington, “Behold the Rapture.” *The Economist*, August 22, 2002.

³⁴ “The fight for God.” *The Economist*, December 19, 2002.

³⁵ Nietzsche first writes of “the death of God” in *The Gay Science*, §108. He also discusses this phenomenon in §343, as well as in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* pp. 124f., 191, 202, 294, 371-379, 398f. in *The Portable Nietzsche*, Walter Kaufmann, tr. (New York: The Viking Press, 1954).

³⁶ *Immortale Dei*, Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, promulgated on November 1, 1885.

contested, particularly when drawing boundaries according to liberal democratic principles of neutrality and equality under law.

A tension clearly relevant to contemporary democratic discourse, less evident is how it may be resolved. Perhaps religion generally is neither reducible to the philanthropic salvation central to Bush's vision, nor the vengeful violence of fundamentalist terrorism. Perhaps its relationship to democracy is significantly more complicated, and begs further examination, rather than the reactionary regulation and surveillance advocated by Bédier and Copé. To arrive at a more nuanced assessment we might turn to a thinker whose beliefs encompassed both poles, one enamored with *and* mistrustful of religion's relationship to the secular state, who identified spiritual faith as a cornerstone of civic morality, and spiritual associations as potentially divisive sources of intolerance and exclusion. To better assess the relationship between religion and politics generally, and Christianity and democracy specifically, we might cast our gaze back to one of the first modern democrats, himself a Protestant:³⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

* * * * *

It is within Rousseau that we find both piousness and profanity, a secular theodicy in which man (rather than God) bears the burdens of enacting his own salvation. Standing at a pivotal crossroads in political thought, one where

³⁷ Although Rousseau was born a Protestant, he converted to Catholicism at the age of 16. For Rousseau's own account, see: *The Confessions*, CW V.38-40; OC I.45-47. In *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (Third Promenade), Rousseau adds this: "Given into my own keeping while still a child and enticed by caresses, seduced by vanity, lured by hope, forced by necessity, I became a Catholic, but I always remained a Christian." CW IX.19; OC I.1013. For Rousseau's description of his rejoining the Protestant faith in 1754, see: CW V.329-330; OC I.392-393.

Enlightenment *philosophes* challenged the theologism dominant since the age of Augustine, the Genevan straddled awkward lines indeed. On one hand he was a compelling secularist, a prolific author who championed radical reform drawn according to democratic principles of liberty and equality. Rousseau's vision of legitimate sovereignty was rooted in the common will of citizens (rather than God), and supported by the primacy of positive law. Yet he was also enraptured with an incomprehensibly harmonious divine order revealed in nature, and urged men to willfully follow their God-given conscience to live in greater accord with this heavenly example.

Incorporating both Christian and secular sources within a singular model of legitimate democratic governance, Rousseau illustrates one possible means of reconciling religion and politics. Guided by a dual sense of past failings and future potential,³⁸ he neither categorically dismissed nor blindly accepted the compatibility of corporeal and spiritual associations. Indeed, despite arguing for their integration, Rousseau took seriously the premise that man's earthly and otherworldly needs can be either mutually exclusive *or* mutually enriching; the choice, as he presents it, is entirely up to us. Religion can serve as a shared source of moral duty, a means of unifying individuals and cultivating our natural sense of brotherly love. It can also breed artificial divisions between people of different creeds, acting as a catalyst to the sectarianism and violent persecution so destructive of common welfare. Religion can

³⁸ Elsewhere I describe this dual sense of past failings and future potential as *pessimistic realism* and *heuristic idealism*. These two stances are two mutually constitutive within Rousseau's work. His deep dissatisfaction with the status quo pressed to him envision a better possible future, even as it forced him to recognize the difficulties in bringing about substantive change. This phenomenon is particularly evident in his assessment of positive religion: Rousseau's condemnation of Catholicism provided impetus for him to found a more virtuous, civil alternative.

damn man to hell, and also nurture a sense of interdependence and faith in better times. As with politics, it can adopt different *forms*, some legitimate, some coercive; some enriching, some self-destructive; some polarizing, some unifying. If papist dogma presented an example of religion at its most harmful, Rousseau struggled to clarify the terms of a truly beneficial piety: one that cultivated reverence towards God *and* man, binding us to our fellows, community and Creator alike.

The faith upon which his vision rested was paradoxical in both senses of the word: it contradicted the commonly held truths of his age, and drew upon apparently incompatible beliefs in man's intrinsic innocence and his capacity for wickedness. Directly refuting orthodox Roman Catholicism, Rousseau revived the Pelagian heresy that humankind was naturally good. Yet this belief was qualified by his equally vociferous insistence upon man's capacity for wickedness, a propensity evidenced by our well-documented history of decline. His solution to the problem of theodicy³⁹—namely, the question of how evil can exist in a world created by an omnipotent God—forced us to consider salvation in secular terms, taking recourse in the very faculties and traits (willing, pride, perfectionism) that led us astray from our inherently pure natures. Yet he never failed to remind men of their self-incurred failings, the degree to which they had strayed from their state of natural harmony. Rousseau's theory of redemption was simultaneously informed by this pessimistic view of human history and optimistic assessment of human nature; if man had made a mess of society, he also possessed the capacity to correct his self-incurred failings. Unlike Augustine, for whom free will offered a moral test geared towards post-

³⁹ To compare Rousseau's views with those of Leibniz see: *Theodicy* I.7-8. For Rousseau's self-distancing from Leibniz see: *Letter to Philopolis*. CW III.129-130; OC III.232-234.

mortem salvation (and thus comprised God's gift to humankind), man replaced God as the facilitator of a salvation possible in *this* world and *this* lifetime.

However, far from absolving religion of a role in politics Rousseau appropriated Christian tropes to serve civic ends, through secular measures. His portrait of human history evoked a fall of Biblical proportions, yet he framed the means of possible redemption in exclusively corporeal terms.⁴⁰ In this, the Genevan's formula stood in sharp contrast to his Christian voluntarist forebears. Augustine understood divine forgiveness as the sole antidote to Adam's debilitating legacy. Salvation, if at all possible, lay in God's merciful grace; human lives were grueling trials of which conformity was the aim. Life was best served by emulating, to the best of our meager human ability, a magnificent, unified divine will. Luther and Calvin shared this sentiment, arguing that man had little recourse to alter his divinely-determined fate.⁴¹ For Luther, the "false idea of 'free-will' is a real threat to salvation, and a delusion fraught with the most perilous consequences"—namely, the misguided premise that human agency influences divine redemption.⁴² Calvin likewise insisted that the human will was emphatically not free, meaning neither

⁴⁰ It can be argued that this is untrue of all of Rousseau's works. To wit, *Julie* and the *Reveries* seek solace to varying degrees (and for varying reasons) after life ends. But even these aims are established *after* earthly remedies have apparently failed. Transcendent post-mortem redemption is a last resort, rather than (as for Augustine) a guiding principle. Although this tension will be examined in greater detail in later chapters, I will side here with Starobinski, who urges his readers to locate consistency in Jean-Jacques' work. Clearly, the bulk of the Genevan's writings grapple with secular solutions to moral and political problems.

⁴¹ There are obviously crucial differences between Luther and Calvin, not least of which involves the latter's emphasis upon the role of good works in gauging the possibility of election. For the purposes of this introduction, however, they both fall under the broad rubric of Protestant voluntarism, under whose terms God alone affects salvation.

⁴² Martin Luther, "Bondage of the Will," in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, John Dillenberger, tr. and ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), p. 189.

strictly autonomous nor capable of emulating a divine, omnipotent will.⁴³ Salvation rested solely on the shoulders of God, whose will alone dictated an individual's fate.

In breaking with this tradition, Rousseau understood our decline as a temporal crisis in need of earthly solutions. The woeful state of human affairs—emblemized by the ironic “triumph” of science and reasoning over nature—was empirically demonstrable throughout history, evidenced by growing inequality and individual alienation from our harmonious, divine natures. Rousseau's ambivalent view of progress did not, however, cause him to categorically condemn humankind as inherently sinful. Rather, modern society was the object of his scorn, a source of moral indeterminacy in need of a political balm. Two thousand years prior, Socrates famously argued that men never knowingly commit evil: acts of ill-repute revealed ignorance more than malfeasance.⁴⁴ As Ernst Cassirer rightly noted, eighteenth century thinkers clarified this sentiment, condemning “not ignorance as such, but ignorance which pretends to be truth and wants to pass for truth.”⁴⁵ Self-delusion—that which “inflicts the mortal wound on knowledge”—found its most egregious form in superstition. Presaging Kant, who famously described enlightenment as “*man's*

⁴³ See: John Calvin, *On God and Political Duty*, *Second Revised Edition*, John Allen and Benjamin B. Warfield, eds. (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1956); *Institutes of the Christian Religion in Two Volumes*, John T. McNeill, ed. and Ford Lewis Battles, tr. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960).

⁴⁴ As Socrates argued in *Timaeus* (86d), “almost all those affections which are called by way of reproach ‘incontinence in pleasure,’ as though the wicked acted voluntarily, are wrongly so reproached; for no one is voluntarily wicked.” Similarly, he asserted in *Protagoras* (345d-345e) that “I am fairly certain that no wise man believes anyone sins willingly or willingly perpetrates any evil or base act. They know very well that all evil or base action is involuntary.” And finally, the Athenian argued in *The Laws* (731c-731d) that “no unjust man is ever voluntarily unjust. For no one anywhere would ever voluntarily take the greatest evil into his most honorable possession and keep it for the rest of his life. So the unjust man, like the man who possesses bad things, is pitiable in every way, and it is permissible to pity such a man when his illness is curable.” See: *Protagoras and Meno*, W.K.C. Guthrie, tr. (New York: Penguin Books, 1956), pp. 80-81; *The Laws of Plato*, Thomas L. Pangle, tr. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 117.

⁴⁵ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Fritz C. A. Koelln & James P. Pettegrove, trs. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), p. 161.

emergence from his self-incurred immaturity ... [namely] the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another,"⁴⁶ Rousseau expounded upon this idea, arguing that doing good depends on knowing and actively pursuing the good, a goal realized through education, and fortification against the vain temptations cultivated by societal pressures. Such practical wisdom was gleaned through sober assessment and individual effort, rather than revelation or divine intervention.⁴⁷

Hobbes had also stayed the hand of God in arguing for a radical corporeal solution to the pressing problems of political instability and resultant (apolitical) anarchy.⁴⁸ Yet whereas Jean-Jacques' *Social Contract* promised virtuous rapture, the Englishman's renunciation of individual will (to the Monarch's authority) offered a more physical assurance: protection in a world torn asunder by the war of all against all. Hobbesian psychology, rooted in a hedonistic physics of appetite and aversion, allowed little room for nuance much less transcendence. His was a world-view in which crisis was a universal condition; humankind had little hope for stability beyond self-abrogating, strong-armed rule. As Charles Taylor noted, Hobbes "thought of our world picture as almost literally put together out of building blocks—which were ultimately the sensations or ideas produced by experience."⁴⁹ By contrast, Rousseau's puzzle was built of more awkward pieces: innocence and guilt,

⁴⁶ Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" in *Political Writings, Second Enlarged Edition*, Hans Reiss, ed. and H.B. Nisbet, tr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 54.

⁴⁷ As we will discuss, Rousseau also stressed the necessity of following our divinely-instilled conscience, although he recognized the acute difficulties this task posed to denatured, socialized creatures.

⁴⁸ This statement follows the basic assumption of C.B. MacPherson, who saw in Hobbes' "state of nature" a thinly-veiled description of Civil War-torn England. See: *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 64-67.

⁴⁹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 197.

involvement and retreat, freedom and chains, individual liberty facilitated by conformity to divine order and corporeal sovereignty, historical decline and the possibility of secular salvation.⁵⁰

Given Rousseau's cacophonous terms, and the critical tone of his own exegeses, a specific problem confronts us from the outset: how can man claim purity of heart if history (and Jean-Jacques himself) suggest quite the opposite? It is tempting to suppose that he cannot: the evidence weighs too heavily against him. Following Rousseau's own account, society is of man's making; *amour propre* and urbanity are perverse *human* predilections. Given this assessment, Jean-Jacques' insistence upon individual innocence seems inconsistent at best. Redemption, after all, presupposes guilt. One cannot rise again without having first fallen. In the Christian tradition, the source of our guilt (free will) is axiomatic; in Rousseau's analysis, blame is more ambiguous. Although Jean-Jacques follows a Biblical narrative replete with innocence, corruption, and redemption, he insists throughout that individuals *en générale* are not culpable because we are not beholden to Adam's sinful legacy.⁵¹ He adheres to an orthodox narrative of decline, while subverting the very foundations of Roman Catholic ontology. Yet perhaps this tension is not as incoherent as it might appear. Recalling Rousseau's famous plea to forgive him of his paradoxes,⁵² the dialectic born of these competing visions serves a substantive purpose: it makes Rousseau's visionary perfectionism remarkably compelling. The

⁵⁰ As we will discuss, Rousseau also maintained his faith in eternal redemption. Indeed, following his exile after the publication of *Emile*, he increasingly embraced the afterlife as a source of solace, a point when God (in contrast to his peers) would recognize and reward his goodness.

⁵¹ As we will examine in Chapters 2 and 3, this proved to be Rousseau's most controversial paradox.

⁵² "Common readers, pardon me my paradoxes. They are necessary when one reflects, and no matter what you might say, I prefer to be a man of paradoxes than a man of prejudices." OC IV.323; E 93.

strength of his solution lies in its stubbornness, in its steadfast adherence to both Biblical form *and* secular means. It is powerful precisely because it speaks of salvation, and identifies common man as catalytic agent.

Writing amidst an age of accelerated spiritual debauchery, of urbanization and cosmopolitan hubris, Rousseau finds redemption in the very faculties which have led humankind to stray from its sympathetic nature. We can, the abbreviated lesson goes, save ourselves only by being true to ourselves: by redirecting our naturally pure wills, and recasting the objects of our desires. A shepherd of sorts, Jean-Jacques challenges us to follow him in simply *being*, in cultivating our intrinsically virtuous natures on a moral and practical path towards earthly redemption. Although we are good at heart, society has swayed our judgment and clouded our conscience. We must therefore re-educate ourselves, solidify our resolution with Spartan fortitude and forge a strong general will to combat the errant appetites of modern particularism. More precisely, the means of existential improvement employ the very faculties (such as self-interest) which have perverted our natural goodness. Man himself has strayed from a virtuous course, and man himself must right his own ship. Prophetic punch combined with clear heresy: such is Rousseau's attachment to and break from orthodox theological discourse, a dissonant rupture that begs clarification.

Examining the confluence of theological and secular sources in Rousseau's work therefore serves three purposes. First, it reveals which aspects of his philosophy are Pagan in origin and which are indebted to earlier Christian traditions. Second, it clarifies both the radical, paradoxical newness of Rousseau's vision (how it departed from existent tradition and commonly held opinion) and the genuine connectedness

he shared with Christian voluntarism.⁵³ And third, exploring these linkages offers a means of reassessing the relationship between spiritual and secular values. Using Rousseau as a lens, we might revisit a “strong” model of democracy enriched and invigorated by its diverse roots, one that sacrifices neither earthly nor otherworldly welfare, balances a skeptical view of positive religion with an undying faith in divine order, and encourages us to move beyond the overly simplistic dichotomies that characterize discussions of the relationship between religion and politics.

Given these terms, this work is best understood as descriptive, restorative and argumentative. Descriptive, in that it identifies Rousseau’s appropriation of both Christian and Pagan concepts of virtue. Restorative, in that it involves—not unlike either *Confessions*—the recollection and attempted reconciliation of these divided (conceptual) histories. And argumentative, in that it finds within Rousseau’s awkward alliance of conflicting traditions a compelling means of incorporating religion into the fabric of a virtuous democracy.

In *l’Ancien régime et la révolution*, Alexis de Tocqueville argued that the Jacobin “campaign against all forms of religion was merely incidental to the French Revolution, a spectacular but transient phenomenon, a brief reaction to the ideologies, emotions, and events which led up to it—but in no sense basic to its program.”⁵⁴ This work is also, therefore, in part a rejoinder to the prescient Frenchman. I use

⁵³ We may consequently read Rousseau not simply as a “modern” with “ancient” affinities, but as a complicated amalgam of competing philosophical, political, ontological and religious world-views. Allan Bloom famously disagreed. As he argued, the “Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns” dominated philosophical discourse in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. For Bloom, “[n]o issue is more important in the history of thought, and Rousseau emphatically takes the side of the ancients... at least so far as literature and morals are concerned.” Although this conclusion is lacking in nuance, we might still accept his claim that “[n]o study of Rousseau can be serious which does not take seriously ‘The Quarrel.’” See: Bloom, *Emile*, p. 492 n. 86.

⁵⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, Stuart Gilbert, tr. (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1955), pp. 5-6.

“rejoinder” rather than “repudiation” because I agree with Tocqueville’s basic premise: the spirit of the French Revolution seemed rightly cosmopolitan, and aggressively agonistic; it aimed at the overhaul of *humankind*, a revision which heralded the death of obsolete hierarchies and mores, secular and spiritual institutions alike. Yet *l’Ancien régime* errs in drawing a sharp distinction between supposedly enlightened, anarchistic, revolutionary upheaval and the attack of specific political and religious institutions.⁵⁵

As Rousseau’s writings make plain, the political landscape of pre-revolutionary France was dominated by papal interests. Political reform *required* religious reform because the two authorities were so deeply linked. Although Tocqueville concurred, in *Democracy and America* he also identified the New World’s religiosity as a primary source of its admirably fierce liberal spirit.⁵⁶ According to Tocqueville, religion (free of clerical dogmatism) fostered community and solidarity, a phenomenon exemplified by American constitutional faith. Given this predilection, it should come as no surprise that when assessing his native land he carefully distinguished between the populist “resuscitation” of man and the “studious ferocity” of anti-Church sentiment.⁵⁷ He was quick to draw a line between popular sovereignty and anti-religiosity because, as America demonstrated, the two were not mutually dependent. Yet in so doing, Tocqueville concealed a point I will attempt to problematize: that the democratic revolution envisioned by Rousseau was both

⁵⁵ Readers should note that although Tocqueville argues that the events of 1789 were neither explicitly political nor religious in aim, he nonetheless details similarities between the Reformation and the French Revolution. *Ibid.*, §I.3.

⁵⁶ As with Rousseau, Tocqueville’s writings force a crucial distinction between anticlericalism and irreligiosity. Arguing that papists exerted a corrupting influence upon the *ancient régime*, he also held that America’s religious spirit was a crucial component of its robust civic culture.

⁵⁷ Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, p. 6.

indebted to and radically dismissive of theological tradition. If Jean-Jacques praised religiosity's moral role within secular polities, so did he repudiate papal authority (which cultivated subordination and political alienation) and Catholic ontology (rooted in the narrative of Original Sin).⁵⁸

According to Rousseau, society could hardly rise from the ashes of our self-incurred wickedness were we not first been able to place trust in our intrinsic *innocence* as creations of a benevolent deity. Nor, more generally, could the French Revolution have occurred *sans le Siècle des lumières*, an age characterized by its simultaneous embrace of reason and sharp critique of clericalism. Although Voltaire, Diderot, Helvétius, Holbach and d'Alembert made Church-bashing a spectator sport, far less obvious is the degree to which this period of thought—like, following Tocqueville, the Jacobin fervor and the France of his day—was still deeply mired in Christian tropes of redemption, rebirth and enlightenment itself.⁵⁹ Rousseau offers the best example of a thinker at such a nexus of spiritual faith and scientific reason, one whose work at turns drew upon and rejected both traditional theology *and* Enlightenment rationalism.

⁵⁸ This is not to say that democracy and Christian ontology are necessarily mutually exclusive, but rather to stress this relationship within Rousseau's works.

⁵⁹ By contrast, David P. Jordan argues the following: "Robespierre would speak at significant moments in his career about some providential scheme of which he was a part, but his providence is so politically conceived, so deliberately tailored to the immediate needs of the French Revolution, that it would be wrong to think of these appeals in traditional religious terms." Although the French Revolution falls beyond the immediate scope of this work, I would argue merely in passing that this assertion follows the "error" already identified in Tocqueville: that the semantic and substantive use of "providence," in this instance, does reveal a connection to "traditional religious terms," even if these terms are opportunistically, politically, purposefully, or even perversely employed. See Jordan, *The Revolutionary Career of Maximilien Robespierre*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 9.

This dialectical quality permeated Rousseau's religious, political and biographical⁶⁰ works alike. As Pierre Hadot rightly notes, the Genevan consistently conveyed "both the echo of ancient traditions and the anticipation of certain modern attitudes."⁶¹ A radical visionary wedded to classical virtue, he applied a deeply Protestant perfectionism to secular politics. No stranger to personal sin,⁶² he waged a veritable holy war of innocence regained in hell-bent times. From the early spitfire of the discourses, to his final *Reveries* (whose longing spirit is well-captured by Matthew 5:8: "Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God"), Rousseau's was a will at war not so much with itself—unlike Augustine—but with society. He drew an emphatic line in the sand, daring men of letters to quell the revolution of the *common man*: he was the harbinger of a revolution in politics founded firmly upon the broad shoulders of *les peuples*, their exemplar and liberator alike.

Given the severity of Rousseau's project—his do-or-die terms, his moral righteousness—it should come as no surprise that the standard range of critiques applied to Jean-Jacques mirrors modern critiques of Christianity's place in politics. The Genevan was, by diverse accounts, anything from a hopeless Utopist to a proto-

⁶⁰ Rousseau makes his life central to his political philosophy. He wrote numerous autobiographical texts (*The Confessions*, *The Dialogues*, and the *Reveries*, as well as fragments, documents, and letters) that, significantly, comprise the first volume of the Pléaïde edition of his *Oeuvres Complètes*. The bulk of his additional works also bear marks of intimacy: he addressed readers as Jean-Jacques, revealed intimate details of his life, and stressed the openness of his writings as a testament of his honesty and sincerity. As such, any study of Rousseau must recognize the unusual personal tenor of his works, and treat his life as he suggested: as a text to be read in conjunction with his more traditional philosophical and political writings. Towards this end, Christopher Kelly succeeds wonderfully with *Rousseau's Exemplary Life: The Confessions as Political Philosophy*.

⁶¹ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Michael Chase, tr. and Arnold I. Davison, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1995), p. 259.

⁶² In *The Confessions*, Rousseau admits to—amongst other things—a bizarre sexual appetite (being spanked, flashing strangers), his erotic relationship with the older Mme. de Warens (whom he called 'maman'), his escapades with various women in France, the abandonment of his children on the footsteps of an orphanage, and lying and thieving as a youth.

Totalitarian.⁶³ These charges prove equally worthy of consideration when applied to Christianity, which classically urges men to place faith in an afterlife, to renounce their individual desires and conform to a divine will. There is a reason such critiques are levied against both Christianity and Rousseau—both tradition and man are prone to similar excesses. Prominent authors from Tocqueville to, more recently, William Galston and Manning Marable have argued for the inclusion of religious groups into the fabric of pluralist politics.⁶⁴ But compelling evidence suggests that religion *in practice*—the positive worship and tenets of organized congregations and creeds—is the proverbial oil to democratic water, a force historically at odds with popular sovereignty.⁶⁵

Democracy is, after all, a politics of pragmatic consensus reflective of its citizenry's general will. Rule of the masses can hardly be confused with Platonic elevation or Christian humility. The strength of democratic theory rather lies in its emphasis upon the common good, an embrace of temporal progress *and* potential. A government which allows each to pursue his own vision without infringing upon the rights of others surely upholds these values. Yet perhaps a democracy which also adopts transcendent plateaus offers a productive balance to pure proceduralism. Succumbing neither to the surreal remoteness ridiculed by Aristophanes,⁶⁶ nor the dry

⁶³ See: J. L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*; Lester G. Crocker, *Rousseau's Social Contract*; Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*; J. H. Huizinga, *Rousseau: The Self Made Saint*; Arthur M. Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau's Thought*.

⁶⁴ See: William A. Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Manning Marable, *The Great Wells of Democracy: The Meaning of Race in American Life*. (New York: BasicCivitas Books, 2002).

⁶⁵ As we will discuss in Chapter 5, Rousseau himself makes precisely this point in *On Civil Religion*.

⁶⁶ See: *The Clouds in Four Plays by Aristophanes*, William Arrowsmith, Richard Lattimore, and Douglass Parker, trs. (New York: Meridian, 1994).

conciliation pioneered by Dewey,⁶⁷ we may foster a democracy guided by a vigorous dialectic between reason and spirit, pragmatism and idealism, what *is* and what *ought to be*.⁶⁸ Might we not, as Rousseau did, keep one foot firmly planted on our home turf, whilst our gaze is cast towards a better future?

The problem, of course, is that a politics which seeks both the *here and now* and the proverbial *pie in the sky* seems divided by mutually exclusive aims. Karl Lowith made precisely this point regarding modernity writ large, arguing that modern man is tragically torn between competing senses of history.⁶⁹ “The modern mind,” he wrote, “has not made up its mind whether it should be Christian or Pagan. It sees with one eye of faith and one eye of reason.”⁷⁰ The modern world “is the outcome of an age-long process of secularization”; it is “worldly and irreligious and yet dependent on the Christian creed from which it is emancipated”; in sum, “it is Christian by derivation and anti-Christian by consequence.”⁷¹

Georges Poulet located a like-minded dissonance in contemporary concepts of time.⁷² During the Eighteenth Century, he observed, “[m]an is revealed as the feckless creator of man,” an awkward burden under which we invariably fail to meet our own lofty, self-imposed standards.⁷³ Echoing Nietzsche, he argued that amidst this intoxicating moment “man suddenly feels for the first time in the Christian era that the instant of his existence is an instant free of all dependence, liberated from all

⁶⁷ See: John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*. (Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 1954).

⁶⁸ Again, readers should consult: *The Social Contract*. CW IV.131; OC III.351.

⁶⁹ See Karl Lowith, *Meaning in History*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949), especially pp. 19, 194, 207.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 201-202

⁷² See Georges Poulet, *Studies in Human Time*, Elliott Coleman, tr. (New York: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), especially pp. 25-29.

⁷³ Poulet, p. 26.

duration, equal to all its own potentialities ... It knows itself to be faultless.”⁷⁴ Although neither Poulet nor Lowith specifically addressed Rousseau in these instances, the Genevan is not above either charge. Caught between ancient and modern notions of fraternity and autonomy, societal guilt and individual innocence, future grace and corporeal redemption, perfectionism and fallibility, Jean-Jacque’s “man” stood at a complicated crossroads indeed.

How, then, did people and politics look for Rousseau, in the real world? To paraphrase Christopher Wallace, *was it all a dream*, or are his reveries coherent?⁷⁵ If we follow Lowith and Poulet, perhaps not. Perhaps the confluence of modern and ancient, Christian and secular, divine and human, subverts the constancy characteristic of a strong theory. But perhaps we may yet accept these analyses and still find in their effects some measure of strength: not one gleaned from the sole standard of either Christian piety or Pagan virtue, but from a democratic amalgam enriched by its eclectic roots. Was this not the conclusion Rousseau himself solicited? Appropriating contrasting traditions within a single model of reform, he forced us to envision a democratic polity supported by religious practice, one which sacrificed neither the spiritual nor secular welfare of its citizens.

This was a peculiar reverie indeed. As Jean Starobinski rightly notes, “Rousseau formule sans doute ici une morale toute profane, mais elle ne se comprend qu’en référence à un modèle religieux.”⁷⁶ Jean-Jacques himself told us as much. He slammed his ill-matched cards on the table for all to see, calling our bluff. He alone was a virtuous *homme à Paris*, wandering much as Diogenes the Cynic combed

⁷⁴ Poulet, p. 21.

⁷⁵ Notorious B.I.G., “Juicy.” From the album: *Ready to Die*, Bad Boy Records, 1994.

⁷⁶ Starobinski, *La transparence et l’obstacle*, p. 83 (tr. p. 63).

Athens' streets nearly four centuries Before Christ, searching with lit lantern in broad daylight for another real man.⁷⁷ With the original Cynic's force, and religious zeal, Jean-Jacques dared us to follow him in enacting a plan previously left in God's hands. The bait lies in full sight: Spartan stoicism and civil religion; a defense of natural innocence corrupted by artifice and hubris; Enlightenment Deism which rejects *philosophe* atheism; a patriotic hymn shunned by Geneva; Rousseau's own conversion from Protestantism to Catholicism, back to Protestantism; an ode to fallen man (both himself and others) raised by the sheer force of his own divinely-guided will; the fervor of a vision which accepts no compromise. If Rousseau's secular stylings marginalized divinity as never before, they bore the divine marks of an all-seeing eye and a master plan. It is, in the final analysis, this mixture of piousness and profanity that makes the Genevan's prescriptions so provocative.

By fleshing out this challenging dialectic, we might achieve some measure of clarity regarding Rousseau's peculiar faith generally, and his practical contribution to the reconciliation of religion and politics specifically. Plagued by potentially irreconcilable divisions, how does his amalgam of Christian and Pagan ideals allow us to reconceptualize the relationship between spiritual and secular values within democratic polities? Are Rousseau's contradictory aims fatally debilitating? Does he merely prop humankind up to fail, charging us with a task (secular salvation) we are incapable of fulfilling? Or do his discordant sources offer an unlikely foundation for democratic meliorism, specifically one that recognizes a positive role for religion?

⁷⁷ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers: Volume II*, R.D. Hicks, tr. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), p. 43.

It is my belief—and this work’s central argument—that Rousseau offers a uniquely revealing lens through which to examine the tensions between religion and politics. Yet because the value of his contribution lies precisely in its recourse to conflicting traditions (Pagan and Christian) and sentiments (deep pessimism and profound optimism), the coherence and (dare we say) utility of his paradoxical project is far from self-evident. Attacked as heretical, Rousseau’s reverie of secular salvation drew heavily upon Christian ideals and assumptions. Mistrustful of religious associations, he urged us to accept divine reverence as a foundation for moral duty and civic unity alike. Contemptuous of society, he found solace in the natural order of God’s creation, and nurtured a faith in mankind’s intrinsic innocence. An awkward mix that coalesced as a singular contention, Rousseau insisted that religiosity both encouraged and preserved democratic virtue. Was his vision practicable, much less compelling? Because the unity of his aim so sharply belies the dissonance of his means, it remains to be seen. Until that point in time we might summon our courage, and even a bit of faith, as we follow our provocative, peculiar guide down this thorny path.

Chapter 2: The Virtue of Paradox

As Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men of corrupt mind and counterfeit faith; but they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all.

—The Second Letter of Paul to Timothy, 3.8, *The New Testament*⁷⁸

I believe in God quite as strongly as I believe any other truth.

—Rousseau, *Letter to Voltaire*⁷⁹

A study of Rousseau's religiosity serves at least three purposes: it sheds light on his broader philosophic project; it offers a possible means of locating the consistency he claimed was intrinsic to his works; and it provides a lens through which to reconsider the relationship between spiritual and secular values. Still, critics of Rousseau have contended that his collective musings on God, human nature, and society were of little utility because, taken as a whole, they were neither consistent nor coherent. Naysayers attributed this failing to our peculiar author's penchant for paradox, a charge from which he hardly retreated.

Consider, for example, Rousseau's request (polite yet insistent) in Book II of *Emile*: "Common⁸⁰ readers, pardon me my paradoxes. They are necessary when one

⁷⁸ 2 Timothy 3.8. All Biblical passages not quoted in primary sources are taken from the following edition: *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Revised Standard Version*, Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

⁷⁹ *Letter to Voltaire*, August 18, 1756. OC IV.1071; CW III.117.

⁸⁰ Rousseau uses the word *vulgaire*, which is understood as *common* when coupled with *reader*. It is worth noting that *vulgaire* has a more confrontational (and negative) connotation than other, more familiar word choices, such as *commun* or *ordinaire*.

reflects, and no matter what you might say, I prefer to be a man of paradoxes than a man of prejudices.”⁸¹

Pardon me my paradoxes. Not even halfway through his massive pedagogical tome, the Tutor’s confession stands out like a sore thumb; it seems a lot to ask. In common contemporary usage, paradox often implies contradiction, or even irreconcilable confusion. Could it be that Rousseau was subverting himself at this early stage? Was he merely presaging the criticisms of a text whose reception pressed him into exile for his remaining years? Was it self-deprecation, or brutally honest self-scrutiny? Should we don investigative caps and uncover the hidden context? Or must we, common readers, take him at his oft-repeated word to take him at his word.

Rousseau never claimed to be a virtuous man, and his *Confessions* make clear an early pattern of less than upright actions. But he did claim to be a good man, a unique man, and a *consistent and honest* man.⁸² Giving him the benefit of the doubt, and seeking clarity, I turned to the *Oxford English Dictionary* and found this under *Paradox*:⁸³

⁸¹ “Lecteurs vulgaires, pardonnez-moi mes paradoxes. Il en faut faire quand on réfléchit, et quoi que vous puissiez dire, j’aime mieux être homme à paradoxes qu’homme à préjugés.” OC IV.323; E 93.

⁸² In his *Letter to Beaumont*, Rousseau applies this consistency to his own defense: “Thus the foolish public vacillates about me, knowing as little why it detests me as why it liked me before. As for myself, I have always remained the same: more ardent in my quests, but sincere in everything, even against myself; simple and good, but sensitive and weak, often doing evil and always loving the good...” CW IX.22; OC IV.928-9; and: “...all these Books [of mine], which you have read, since you judge them, breath the same maxims; the same ways (*manières*) of thinking are not more disguised in them.” OC IV.933; CW IX.26.

⁸³ We might also consider the etymology. *Paradox* comes from the Latin *paradoxum*, from the Greek *paradoxus*, meaning “contrary to received opinion or expectation,” and “past, beyond, contrary to opinion.” According to Raymond Trousson and Frédéric S. Eigeldinger, the *Encyclopédie* entry for *paradoxe* (penned by d’Alembert) presented a relatively new meaning of the word most frequently in used in relation to the sciences. This sense implied an “iconoclastic idea, if not heretical, that is to say a false idea.” In fact, d’Alembert’s definition was more ambiguous: “*en Philosophie*, c’est une proposition absurde en apparence, à cause qu’elle est contraire aux opinions reçues, & qui néanmoins

A statement or tenet contrary to received opinion or belief; often with the implication that it is marvelous or incredible; sometimes with unfavourable connotation, as being discordant with what is held to be established truth, and hence absurd or fantastic; sometimes with favourable connotation, as a correction of vulgar error.⁸⁴

Pardon me my paradoxes might therefore be rephrased as *pardon me my statements which stand in contrast to commonly held opinion*.⁸⁵

On this—the contrariness and correlative uniqueness of his thought—Rousseau was certainly consistent. Throughout *Emile*, as in many of his other works, he reminded us of his opposition to the two major intellectual forces of his age: the Christian ecclesiasts and the *philosophes*. No meager foes, Church and academy dominated the production and dissemination of political, social and spiritual thought. This was no mean feat in a century described then—and, nearly three centuries later, now—as an age driven by ideas, by the illumination born of inspired reasoning.

est vraie au fond, ou du - moins peut recevoir un air de vérité.” (“in *Philosophy*, it is a seemingly absurd proposition, because it is contrary to received opinions, & it nevertheless is basically true, or at least can hold an inkling of truth.”) See: Trousson and Eigeldinger, *Dictionnaire de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2001), p. 683. For d’Alembert’s definition see: Diderot, *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts, et des Métiers, par une société de gens de lettres, première édition de 1751-1780*. (Neuchâtel: Chez Samuel Faulche & Compagnie, 1765), Tome XI, pp. 894-895.

⁸⁴ *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Long before Rousseau, Socrates popularized paradox as a philosophical method of seeking the truth. Throughout *Emile*, Rousseau affirms the most central Socratic injunction to “know thyself.” His Socratic lineage is often raised in relation to this Delphic command. Less frequently mentioned is their common insistence upon the pedagogical value of paradox—the exercise of contradictory opinion as a means of seeking and uncovering the truth. For examples of the importance of self-knowledge in *Emile* see: E 48, 74, 83, 213, 240, 243-4, 270, 287.

⁸⁵ Three French dictionaries confirm this reading. In his 1690 *Dictionnaire Universel*, Furetière describes “paradoxe” as a “[p]roposition surprenant et difficile à croire, à cause qu’elle choque les opinions communes et reçues.” As examples, he cites the Stoics and Copernicus. The *Grand Larousse* likewise lists “paradoxe” as both an “[o]pinion contraire aux vues communément admises,” and (more negatively) as something “qui paraissent défier la logique parce qu’ils présentent en eux-mêmes des aspects contradictoires.” Hugo’s label of Rousseau—the “Don Quixote of Paradox”—is attributed to the former sense. The *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* confirms this less critical usage in the eighteenth century. Although as early as 1662 Pascal implied that paradoxes clashed with “good sense” (a charge clearly shared by Rousseau’s critics), this more pejorative connotation was not formally adopted in dictionaries until 1832. See: Antoine Furetière’s *Dictionnaire Universel*, Tome III. (The Hague and Rotterdam: Chez Arnout & Reinier Leers, 1690). *Grand Larousse de la langue française en sept volumes: tome cinquième*. (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1976), p. 3956. *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, Alain Rey, ed. (Paris: Dictionnaires LE ROBERT, 1992), p. 1422.

Contemporary readers may scoff at priests or professors, as purveyors of pedophilia, or a tweedy clan totally removed from the machinations of real world politics. But during Rousseau's age, these men of the cloth and men of letters wielded an influence far beyond the scope of their professional domains. To attack either one was a feat of daring, and (because they were mutually antagonistic) a corresponding proclamation of allegiance to either philosophy or the papacy. Attacking *both* might have seemed, especially in hindsight, to possess the reckless energy of a suicidal mission. At the very least, it left so bold a protagonist with few compatriots.

Such was Rousseau's fate. The tragedy, the inevitability, the sheer weight of that ancient term holds particularly true to a thinker for whom truth-telling (as he saw it) was less an option than an obligation, a destiny, a civic duty.⁸⁶ He alone was poised to tell the truth, because he alone recognized so clearly the problems of and prescriptions for his age. Urgent necessity underscored Rousseau's descriptions of human history's abject spiral, and his prescriptions for the possible means of our redemption. By his own admission, he had little choice; our collective future depended upon bringing these truths to light.

It was this dire term—not personal safety, security, welfare, or reputation—that drove the Genevan's quest. Consider this soliloquy, taken from the twelfth fragment of his *Letter to Christophe de Beaumont*:

⁸⁶ The compulsive nature of Rousseau's confessional style notwithstanding, he was deeply ambivalent about his career as an author. I explore this dynamic elsewhere in greater detail, addressing issues such as: his epiphany and subsequent "conversion" en route to Vincennes; his insistence that he defends himself in writing only out of necessity; his elusions to being "forced" to take up his pen; and his aspiration to abandon writing and the public life for a solitary, self-contained existence. This study draws much from Jean Starobinski's reading of Rousseau as a fundamentally passive figure in *Transparency and Obstruction*.

My own interest is to say what is useful to others without regard to my own utility, and that honor which I alone will have among the authors of my century will always cause me to be distinguished from them all and will compensate me for all their advantages. If one wishes they will be better philosophers and finer wits, they will be more profound thinkers, more precise reasoners, more pleasing writers; but I, I will be more disinterested in my maxims, more sincere in my sentiments, more an enemy of satire, bolder in speaking the truth, when it is useful to others without troubling myself about my fortune nor about my safety. They may deserve pensions, employments, places in academies, and I, I will have only insults and slights; they will be decorated and I, I will be stigmatized, but it does not matter, my disgraces will honor my courage...⁸⁷

Voltaire may revel in his witticisms. Diderot's plays may delight more people. Philosophers may enjoy their profundity and sophistication. Others may be honored in academies and salons, and decorated by their governments. But these gains were of little concern to Jean-Jacques. He had only his claim to the truth, and the courage to press this upon a people 'tyrannized' by irresponsible élites.

Rousseau's argument drew upon classical tales of individual courage legitimized by both resistance to authority and an ascetic aversion to prosperity; persecution and privation actually offered testimony of his sincerity.⁸⁸ In so defending himself, he resurrected tropes pioneered by Socrates, the Stoics, and the figure of Jesus. Socrates famously refused compensation for his teachings, and

⁸⁷ *Letter to Beaumont*. OC IV.1022; CW IX.94. The original passage reads: "Mon intérêt à moi est de dire ce qui est utile aux autres sans égard à ma propre utilité, et cet honneur que j'aurai seul parmi les auteurs de mon siècle me fera toujours distinguer d'eux tous et me dédommagera de tous leurs avantages. Ils seront si l'on veut meilleurs philosophes et plus beaux esprits, ils seront penseurs plus profond[s], raisonneurs plus exacts, écrivains plus agréables ; mais moi je serai plus désintéressé dans mes maximes, plus sincère dans mes sentiments, plus ennemi de la satire, plus hardi à dire la vérité, quand elle est utile aux autres sans m'embarrasser de ma fortune ni de ma sûreté. Ils pourront mériter des pensions, des emplois, des places d'académies et moi je n'aurai que des injures et des affronts ; ils seront décorés et moi je serai flétri, mais n'importe, mes disgrâces honoreront mon courage..."

⁸⁸ The word *testimony* has strong Biblical connotations. In Scriptural language, it refers to the Mosaic Decalogue. See, for example, Exodus 31.18: "And he gave to Moses, when he had made an end of speaking with him upon Mount Sinai, the two tables of the testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God."

presented his poverty as an exhibit of self-defense during his trial.⁸⁹ Seneca and the Stoics shunned material possessions as a virtuous means of living in greater accord with nature. And Jesus, Saint Paul revealed, willfully abandoned riches for rags, a sacrifice committed for the spiritual wealth of his followers.⁹⁰

Rousseau made a similar claim. For the sake of his fellow citizens and, indeed, the human race, he willfully denied his material best-interests. Even if his own age misunderstood him, in the end he trusted his reputation to the hindsight of history. His “disgrace will honor his courage” because eventually his paradoxes would reveal the goodness of his heart, the truthfulness of his writings, the practical value of his vision, and the short-sightedness of those contemporaries scornful of his insights.

Truth be told, no matter the cost; his *Confessions* drives this point home, exposing past episodes of *untruthfulness* in explicit detail. The shame of his *petits mensonges* are left to public domain, a testament to his honesty even when it reveals a pattern of *dishonesty*. His second apprenticeship to the engraver M. Ducommun gave him “vices that I would have hated, such as lying, laziness, theft.”⁹¹ After being cajoled by a journeyman named Verrat, he commits his first theft, stealing asparagus and reselling it for pocket change.⁹² He reveals an unsavory penchant for flashing strangers “of the opposite sex” from dark alleys. After one such episode he was chased down and, upon being caught, attempted to excuse himself by way of a tall

⁸⁹ See: *The Apology*, 19D-21A in Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*, Hugh Tredennick, tr. (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 48-49.

⁹⁰ 2 Corinthians 2 8.9: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.”

⁹¹ *The Confessions*. CW V.39; OC I.31.

⁹² *The Confessions*. CW V.27-8; OC I.32-33.

tale: he claimed to be “a young foreigner of high birth whose brain was deranged.”⁹³ Most memorably, he forces himself to admit “the long remembrances of crime and the unbearable weight of remorse with which my conscience is still burdened after forty years,”⁹⁴ the stealing of a pretty pink ribbon whose theft he imputed to a young innocent, a local girl named Marion.

Ribbons and vegetables, a proclivity for perversity, an adolescent streak of erratic judgment. A riches of embarrassment, certainly, but necessary to understand Rousseau as he truly was. His was a heart unmasked, a life laid bare to the public. His work turned on this principle of honesty: the honesty with which he presents both himself *and* his age, with which he reveals strengths and weaknesses with equal candor. Humankind was naturally good, society artificially bad. In so arguing, was Rousseau not compelled to press this critique upon himself? He too was a good man guilty of actions with ignoble consequences.⁹⁵ To hide such memorable transgressions would have been, not in poor taste, but in poor faith. Guarding his missteps would have been, not an act of paradox, but an act of self-subversion that undermined the very quest to which Rousseau had dedicated his life: to seek and reveal the truth.

As he wrote unabashedly in *Emile*, “[z]eal and good faith have taken the place of prudence for me up to now. I hope these guarantors will not abandon me in time of need. Readers, do not fear from me precautions unworthy of a friend of the truth.

⁹³ *The Confessions*. CW V.74-75; OC I.88-90.

⁹⁴ *The Confessions*. CW V.70; OC I.84. For Rousseau’s full account see CW.V 70-73; OC I.84-87.

⁹⁵ As he makes plain in *The Confessions*, “I have shown myself as I was, contemptible and low when I was so, good, generous, sublime when I was so.” CW V.5; OC I.V.

I shall never forget my motto.”⁹⁶ His motto, clipped from Juvenal’s *Satires*, was *Vitam impendere vero* (*Dedicate life to truth*).⁹⁷ Truth cast a broad swath indeed, and took its sharpest stabs when revealing flaws: of his own, of the Church, of the academy, of human society. This critical acumen proved a costly profession, particularly for a mere man of the peoples, a Genevan set loose in the hotbed that was eighteenth century Paris, an expatriate slowed by a urinary tract disorder no less. Truth be damned, the odds were against him; an individual attacking both papists and philosophers was bound to lose *something*.

Yet attack he did. Rousseau has been accused of many things by his compatriots and posthumous critics alike, but cowardly he was not. He targeted theological and intellectual élites with equal force and candor. Although mutual enemies, Rousseau charged both with similar offenses: they were deceptive dogmatists cultivating private interests under the auspices of public good. Both were grossly self-promoting, driven by vanity and *amour-propre*, rather than a concern with the welfare of society and *ses peuples*. They were fundamentally dishonest, preaching salvation through subservience (to either dogma or reason), while subordinating the welfare of all to exclusive, sectarian interests. Presenting themselves as above reproach, they deserved our greatest censure.

⁹⁶ *Emile*. E 206.

⁹⁷ Rousseau also mentions this “motto” in his *Letter to d’Alembert*, the epigraph to *Letters Written From the Mountain*, and *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (Fourth Promenade). Its original context is quite revealing. The *Satire* in which it appears is a story illustrating the Emperor Domitian’s tyranny and absurdity. Domitian summons his cringing court to solve a ridiculous problem: how to cook a fish too large for its pan. We are told that one of these members, Crispus, never spoke out against him and thus “he survived for eighty winters and as many summers, protected by that armour” of passive obedience. (IV.92-93) As Juvenal writes, “Crispus never struck out against the current, nor was he ever that noble type of Roman subject who could freely state his opinions and risk his life for the truth.” (IV.89-91) In adopting this last line as his motto, Rousseau identifies himself precisely with the “noble” citizen who *would*—and did—risk personal livelihood “for the truth.” See: Juvenal, *The Satires*, Niall Rudd, tr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 28.

The Church, for example, taught a “barbarous education which sacrifices the present to an uncertain future, which burdens a child with chains of every sort and begins by making him miserable in order to prepare him from afar for I know not what pretended happiness which is to be believed he will never enjoy.”⁹⁸ With their “insipid lessons,” “long-winded moralizing,” and “eternal catechisms,”⁹⁹ they promoted a “false wisdom which incessantly projects us outside of ourselves, which always counts the present for nothing, and which, pursuing without respite a future that retreats in proportion as we advance, by dint of transporting us where we are not, transports us where we shall never be.”¹⁰⁰ The chimera of post-mortem redemption lures us to seek an ever-elusive salvation. In the process, it discourages the possibility of genuine reform and salvation in *this* world, instead fixing our gaze on an indeterminate future while chaining us to a grim present.

Philosophers were no better. “Raised in all the corruption of the colleges,”¹⁰¹ enraptured by their own hubris,¹⁰² their vanity and pride was no less pernicious than that of their orthodox enemies. “Where,” Rousseau asked, “is the philosopher who would not gladly deliver mankind for his own glory? Where is the one who in the secrecy of his heart sets himself any other goal than that of distinguishing himself?”¹⁰³ His contemporary *hommes à lettres* claimed to possess truth, but taught only vainglory. “Under the haughty pretext that they alone are enlightened, true, and of good faith, they imperiously subject us to their peremptory decisions and claim to

⁹⁸ *Emile*. E 79.

⁹⁹ *Emile*. E 316.

¹⁰⁰ *Emile*. E 79.

¹⁰¹ *Emile*. E 221.

¹⁰² “I know of no philosopher who has yet been so bold as to say: this is the limit of what man can attain and beyond which he cannot go. We do not know what our nature permits us to be.” (*Emile*. E 62.)

¹⁰³ *Emile*. E 269.

give us as the true principles of things the unintelligible systems they have built in their imagination.”¹⁰⁴ Their purported truths were elaborate feats of fancy whose want of substance was rivaled only by a conspicuous incoherence. Philosophic perfectionism mixed Spartan coercion and Athenian frivolousness, to decidedly deleterious consequences. Rather than aiding society, they increased the speed of its downfall. Rather than putting their erudition and learning to practical purposes, they wasted their time (and ours) on vain frivolities.

The church and the academy were, in short, two birds of a feather. “The two parties attack each other reciprocally with so many sophisms,” yet neither fostered virtue, goodness or meaningful enlightenment.¹⁰⁵ Put more strongly, they actually caused much harm. Both falsely claimed to possess a monopoly on truth, and used this self-anointed grace to subject humankind to the tyranny of elaborately justified opinions. Peddling ideals unfulfilled in practice, priest and philosopher alike demanded contrition to hollow promises. As such, they epitomized society’s most perverse influence: the denaturing rule of *doxa*.

It was a story of muses whose lulling tunes promise big payoff but lead to swift demise. Jean-Jacques ignored their refrains, and refused to bow to their authority. Instead, he countered with paradox in its sharpest form: a severe mistrust of these dominant poles of opinion whose empires—Christian dogmatism and philosophic rationalism—were enemies of truth and societal welfare alike.

To better gauge Rousseau’s request of pardon, we must therefore bear in mind the contentious nature of his paradoxes, and the vigorous charges he levies against the

¹⁰⁴ *Emile*. E 312.

¹⁰⁵ *Emile*. E, 312n.

established “truths,” and so-called truth-tellers, of his age. To pardon Rousseau, we must first accept the substance of his accusations. Doing so, in turn, requires acknowledging his candid evaluations of his influential adversaries. Forgiveness in this instance is an act of solidarity. Rousseau demands not simply siding with him (both the “honest” author and the “good” man), but rejecting the targets of his wrath.

Rousseau was perhaps the most famous to press this demand upon his readers, but certainly not the first. His much-maligned foil Hobbes said just as much in 1656, in a moment of aggressive self-defense. In 1645, Hobbes and the Anglican Bishop John Bramhall, both Royalists forced into exile during the Civil War, were invited by William Cavendish, the Marquess of Newcastle, to debate the question of human freedom at his Paris home. These discussions led to the publication some nineteen years later of Hobbes’ *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance*. In this work, Hobbes railed against Bramhall and linguistic ignorance in one fell swoop:

The Bishop speaks often of Paradoxes with such scorn or detestation, that a simple Reader would take a Paradox either for Felony, or some other heinous crime, or else for some ridiculous turpitude; whereas perhaps a Judicious Reader knows what the word signifies; And that a Paradox, is an opinion not yet generally received.¹⁰⁶

“Simple” readers conflate paradox with unpardonable offense. The more “judicious” exercise greater restraint in judgment. They understand that paradoxes are unfashionable, but not necessarily erroneous.

To punctuate this point, Hobbes reminds us that even “Christian religion was once a Paradox.”¹⁰⁷ Historically, he is correct. As Karl Jaspers argued, although “it is not possible to base a portrait of Jesus on compelling historic proof, his reality is

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance*. (London: Printed for Andrew Crook, 1656), p. 239.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

clearly discernible through the veil of tradition.”¹⁰⁸ For reasons unclear, we know that Jesus did in fact go to Jerusalem preaching what were then paradoxes, and was crucified for his teachings.¹⁰⁹

Hobbes’ reminder is twofold: popular opinion is fallible and relative in character, and contrary opinions may be redeemed in time. Nonconformity demonized in one age or locale can pass for gospel in another. In fact, canonization and martyrdom occur *only* through the passage of time (through reification). This is particularly true of Christianity, a phenomenon whose appreciation emerged in hindsight, and drew legitimacy from its resistance to the remarkable hostility with which it was first received. What was once paradox, what once begged a sentence of death, became the most wildly influential spiritual, political and intellectual force of Hobbes’ realm.

Again, the lesson is simple: paradoxes are relative by definition. They are measured in relation to temporal opinion, rather than objective standards of truth or virtue. Although paradoxes run contrary to general opinion, they are neither inherently ill-conceived, nor categorically criminal. Yet for Rousseau, this distinction was moot. As with Jesus, the Genevan’s paradoxes *did* criminalize him, particularly following the publication of *Emile*. And here, Hobbes’ example sounds a powerful

¹⁰⁸ Karl Jaspers, *Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus: The Paradigmatic Individuals*, Hannah Arendt, ed. and Ralph Manheim, tr. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1962), p. 64. Jaspers also demonstrates the relative unimportance of historic accuracy to Christian believers, a point compatible with Rousseau’s own appreciation of myth. (See pp. 64-86.) For an extended discussion of this theme in Rousseau’s works, see below.

¹⁰⁹ “This God who for Jesus was not physically present—not in visions and not in voices—was able to put absolutely everything in the world in question,” Jaspers writes. The consequences were radically contrary: “Jesus broke free from every practical order in the world. He saw that all orders and habits had become pharisaical; he points to the source in which they melt to nothingness. All earthly reality is deprived of its foundation, absolutely and definitively. All orders whatsoever, the bonds of piety, of law, of reasonable custom, collapse.” Humankind kind is left only with the absolute imperative “to follow God into the kingdom of heaven.” See: Jaspers, p. 79.

note. The once-hunted—Christian religion—had become the hunter; Jean-Jacques, condemned for impiety, was its prey.

* * * * *

Rousseau should have known better. Evidence suggests that he in fact did. In Fragment VII of *Institutions politiques*,¹¹⁰ “Luxury, Commerce, and the Arts,” he admitted that “I have learned through experience the damage that demonstrated propositions can suffer from being called Paradoxes.”¹¹¹ Rousseau was referring to the abundant criticism that followed the publication of his *Discourses*. As Genevan naturalist Charles Bonnet (under the antagonistic pseudonym M. Philopolis, or “Mr. City-lover”) wrote in a letter dated August 25, 1755, Jean-Jacques “has adopted ideas that seem to me so opposed to the truth and so ill suited to make happy people” that “[m]uch will, without doubt, be written against this new Discourse, as much has been written against the one that won the prize of the Academy of Dijon.”¹¹² Rousseau paraded banners of natural goodness and truth, but presented only misery and falsehoods. This was “a paradox that he has cherished only too much.”¹¹³ In closing,

¹¹⁰ In its preface, Rousseau describes *The Social Contract* as a “short treatise... taken from a more extensive work, which I undertook in the past without considering my strength, and have long since abandoned.” (*Social Contract*. CW IV.131; OC III.349). The “more extensive work” was his intended masterpiece, *Institutions politiques*. Rousseau began writing this unfinished work sometime between 1754 and 1759. Fragment VII was likely written no earlier than 1756, and no later than 1758. This would place its composition after the publication of the *Second Discourse*, and before the publication of the *Letter to d’Alembert*. For Rousseau’s description see: *The Confessions*. CW V.340-341; OC I.404-405.

¹¹¹ *Political Fragments*. CW IV.46; OC III.518.

¹¹² *Letter from M. Philopolis on the Subject of the Discourse of M. J.-J. Rousseau of Geneva on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*. CW III.123; OC III.1383.

¹¹³ *Letter from M. Philopolis*. CW III.123; OC III.1383.

Bonnet struck an incredulous note: “Had we ever presumed that a Writer who thinks, would advance in a century like ours this strange paradox”?¹¹⁴

According to Bonnet, Jean-Jacques was a depressing rabble-rouser, his writings desolate tirades, and his inexplicable contrariness an affect to garner attention.¹¹⁵ Rousseau bristled at the charges. He was particularly upset with the implication that his paradoxes were falsehoods, and perverse sources of personal pride. “Let us suppose,” he wrote in rebuttal, “that a singular mind (*esprit*), bizarre, and in fact *a man of paradoxes*, then dared to reproach others for the absurdity of their maxims, to prove to them that they run to death in seeking tranquility, that by dint of being reasonable they do nothing but ramble.”¹¹⁶

The note of pardon struck later in *Emile* here smacks of indignation. Rousseau the contrary, Rousseau the unique, was merely holding his peers accountable for the “absurdity” of their “ramblings.” At this early date he was conscious of the practical dangers of writing paradox; he simply threw caution to the wind. The truth of *one* was all the more important considering the falsehoods of *many*. Drawing courage from faith in his own truthfulness, Rousseau was firmly convinced that his contemporaries were in the wrong. Their maxims posed the philosophical equivalent of lemmings, leading us from steep cliffs towards accelerated demise. His *Discourses* offered an alternate path to tread.

¹¹⁴ *Letter from M. Philopolis*. “Eût-on jamais présumé qu’un Écrivain qui pense, avanceroit dans un siècle tel que le nôtre cet étrange paradoxe, qui renferme seul une si grande foule d’inconséquences, pour ne rien dire de plus fort ?” OC III.1385; CW III.125.

¹¹⁵ This follows Diderot’s charge that Rousseau had reversed his position on the arts and sciences, implying that a critical stance would garner more attention than an affirmative case.

¹¹⁶ *Letter from J.-J. Rousseau to M. Philopolis*. OC.III.231; CW III.127. (My emphasis.)

In asking pardon some years later, Rousseau softened his tone—though not his resolve. Still convinced of the value of his contentiousness, he turned to readers for reprieve. Demanding that we pardon him his paradoxes, Jean-Jacques was certainly begging an important question; he was just asking it of the wrong people.

“Common readers” were clearly not his most pointed critics. In the years following his exchange with Bonnet, *Julie* became the best-selling novel of the eighteenth century.¹¹⁷ *Le Devin du village*, an opera composed in the Italian style, opened in Fontainebleau to a stunningly positive reception. In spite of unequivocal censure and censoring, *Emile* was widely read and followed (to the extent that breastfeeding became *très chic* amongst French mothers). And his *Social Contract* was embraced as far as Poland, for whose government he wrote a commissioned piece on political reform.

Although Rousseau’s influential detractors multiplied their protests following his 1762 publications,¹¹⁸ evidence in the form of letters suggest that the public had not yet followed suit. On June 15, 1762, d’Alembert wrote Rousseau to assure him that the French peoples applauded his controversial writings.¹¹⁹ And one day later, Genevan minister Paul-Claude Moulton comforted his friend that a majority of his

¹¹⁷ Robert Darnton labeled *Julie* Rousseau’s “supreme best-seller.” *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), p. 66.

¹¹⁸ Namely, *The Social Contract* and *Emile*.

¹¹⁹ Raymond Trousson and Frédéric S. Eigeldinger, *Rousseau au jour le jour: Chronologie*. (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1998), p. 172. Notably, d’Alembert was the only *philosophe* to offer such support, save Charles Duclos. In *The Confessions*, Rousseau seems characteristically ungrateful, underscoring the fact that d’Alembert had not signed the letter. For Rousseau’s account see: *The Confessions*, OC I.574; CW V.480. Quoted in Maurice Cranston, *The Solitary Self: Jean-Jacques Rousseau in Exile and Adversity*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 2-3. Letter appears in CC XI.1874.82-84.

fellow Swiss (“*nos bourgeois*”) admired *The Social Contract* as the “arsenal of liberty.”¹²⁰

Common readers were certainly far more forgiving than the subjects of his scorn. Rousseau’s intellectual peers, a proud lot of atheists and anti-Clericalists, might have been more supportive had he not already alienated and infuriated them. His friendship with Diderot deteriorated over a controversy dating from 1757. In his play *Lefils naturel*, Diderot attacks the idea of a solitary individual (whose part is played by Dorval, a character based on Rousseau) with a line much to Jean-Jacques’ disliking: “il n’ y a que le méchant qui soit seul.”¹²¹ On August 30, 1755, Voltaire wrote a letter to Rousseau in which he described the *Second Discourse* as a “book against the human race.”¹²² Voltaire sounds both hostile and dumbfounded, quipping that “[n]ever has so much intelligence been used in seeking to make us stupid.”¹²³ Following Rousseau’s *Letter to d’Alembert* (denouncing a proposed Genevan theater) nearly three years later, Voltaire wrote his *own* letter to d’Alembert dismissing Rousseau as “a Diogène barking.”¹²⁴ “There is a double ingratitude in him,” Voltaire

¹²⁰ “Nos bourgeois n’en disent pas moins que ce *Contrat social* est l’arsenal de la liberté, et tandis qu’un petit nombre jette feu & flammes, la multitude triomphe.” *Le ministre Paul-Claude Moulou à Rousseau*. CC XI.1877.90.

¹²¹ The full sentence is actually quite inflammatory. Diderot’s character Constance uses a Rousseauist argument (an ‘appeal to the heart’) to convince Dorval that the “good man” exists only in society: “J’en appelle à votre cœur; interrogez-le; et il vous dira que l’homme de bien est dans la société, et qu’il n’y a que le méchant qui soit seul.” From *Le fils naturel*, Act IV, Scene 3. In: *Diderot: Œuvres, Tome IV: Esthétique – Théâtre*, Laurent Versini, ed. (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, S.A., 1996), p. 1113. For Rousseau’s reaction to this “scathing and harsh sentence without any qualification,” see: *The Confessions*. CW V.382; OC I.455.

¹²² *Letter from Voltaire to Rousseau* (August 30, 1755). CW III.102; CC III.317.156.

¹²³ *Letter from Voltaire to Rousseau* (August 30, 1755). CW III.102; CC III.317.157. Voltaire’s sentence reads: “On n’a jamais tant employé d’esprit à vouloir nous rendre Bêtes.”

¹²⁴ Quoted in Cranston, *The Noble Savage: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1754-1762*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 137. Voltaire here compares Rousseau to Diogenes the Cynic, one of the most colorful figures in the history of Greek philosophy. An exile himself (from his native Sinope), Diogenes’ practice of Cynicism was notably flamboyant. Embracing hardship as a training method for self-sufficiency, he earned an (in)famous reputation for spectacles such as public masturbation, begging to statues, and sleeping in hard tubs. He was often described as a “mad dog”

continued. “He attacks an art which he practices himself, and he has written against you, who have overwhelmed him with praises.”¹²⁵ Years later, Rousseau’s reputation as an ingrate magnified. Retreating from the continent following the furor of 1762, he even managed to enrage his host, the notoriously mild-mannered Hume, who vilified him as “the blackest and most atrocious villain, beyond comparison, that now exists in the world.”¹²⁶

If Rousseau’s personality incensed his peers, his paradoxes—particularly those detailed in *The Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Vicar*—aroused the wrath of Church and state alike. Despite his fame as an author throughout Europe, official critics in France and Geneva greeted his 1762 publications with swift orders of interdiction. In Moulton’s same June 16 letter pledging Swiss popular support, he also warned Rousseau that the Petit Conseil had banned *The Social Contract* and begun a formal investigation of *Emile*.¹²⁷

The news came as no surprise. One week prior, on June 9, the French Parlement had issued a warrant for his arrest. The Genevan was charged with penning a work of “impious and detestable principles” contemptuous of religion,

and a “Socrates gone mad.” See: Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers: Volume II*, pp. 23-85.

¹²⁵ Quoted in Ibid., p. 137. Voltaire vigorously repeated these charges in a subsequent letter to d’Alembert. (See Ibid., p. 278). These correspondences followed his biting (and very personal) attacks on *Julie* and its author, written under the pseudonym Marquis de Ximénès. See: *Lettres à M. de Voltaire sur La Nouvelle Héloïse* (Geneva: 1761, 25 pages in octavo).

¹²⁶ Quoted in Cranston, *The Solitary Self*, 168. In leaving England, Rousseau also rejected the one hundred pound yearly pension granted him by King George III. For a concise exposition of the sudden demise of the relationship between Rousseau and Hume, see pp. 165-169. See also: Edward Duffy, *Rousseau in England: The Context for Shelley’s Critique of the Enlightenment*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

¹²⁷ Moulton à Rousseau. CC XI.1877.90. Dates confirmed in Trousson and Eigeldinger, *Rousseau au jour le jour*, p. 172. The works were formally investigated, beginning on June 11, 1762. By June 14, both were officially deemed “very dangerous.” See: James Miller, *Rousseau: Dreamer of Democracy*, pp. 81-82.

Church and King alike.¹²⁸ The court order condemned him as a blasphemer “who subjects Religion to the examination of reason, who establishes nothing but a purely human faith, and who accepts neither truths nor dogmas in the matter of Religion.”¹²⁹ Adding insult to impiety, Rousseau also asserted “propositions which tend to give a false and odious character to the sovereign authority, to destroy the principle of obedience due to him, and to weaken the respect and the love of the People for their King.”¹³⁰

Rousseau had struck a passionate nerve, one not easily calmed. Nearly three months later, on August 28, Archduke Christophe de Beaumont continued the robust denouncement. In a Pastoral Letter, he condemned *Emile* for

containing an abominable doctrine, suited to overturning natural Law and to destroying the foundations of the Christian Religion; establishing maxims contrary to Evangelical morality; tending to disturb the peace of States, to stir up Subjects against the authority of their Sovereign; as containing a very great number of propositions respectively false, scandalous, full of hatred against the Church and its Ministers, departing from the respect due to Sacred Scripture and the Tradition of the Church, erroneous, impious, blasphemous, and heretical.¹³¹

Beaumont described the work’s author as “a character given to paradoxes of opinions and conduct, zeal for ancient maxims with the rage for establishing novelties, the obscurity of retreat with the desire to be known by everyone.”¹³² The ensuing order

¹²⁸ These quotes appear in the *Extrait des Registres du Parlement, Arrêt de la cour de Parlement, Qui condamne un Imprimé ayant pour titre Émile, ou de l’Éducation, par J. J. Rousseau, imprimé à La Hage... M.DCC.LXII., à être lacéré & brûlé par l’Exécuteur de la Haute Justice*. The text is reproduced in the beginning of Rousseau’s *Letter to Beaumont*, 1763 edition. See: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Citoyen à Genève, à Christophe de Beaumont, Archevêque de Paris, Duc de St. Cloud, Pair de France, Commandeur de l’Ordre du St. Esprit, Proviseur de Sorbonne, &c.* (Amsterdam: Chez Marc Michel Rey, 1763). See also: CC XI.A254.262-266.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ *Pastoral Letter of His Grace, the Archbishop of Paris*. CW IX.16.

¹³² *Pastoral Letter*. CW IX.4.

of contraband reiterated what the Parlement had previously made plain. *Emile* was a work deeply threatening to the very fabrics of eighteenth century order. It was immoral, revolutionary, hateful, and fundamentally *wrong*. Rousseau's "paradoxes" were irresolvable contradictions, the public ravings of a supposedly solitary individual who evoked traditionalism in the service of its own destruction. They also carried the stigma of a communicable disease: not only were they offensive, they would infect the masses with dreams of overthrowing Church and Sovereign alike. A work of imminent danger, its distribution had to be stopped, its author held accountable.

It should now be clear why Maurice Cranston describes, without exaggeration, this latter third of Jean-Jacques' life as a period of "exile and adversity."¹³³ Woody Allen once dubbed paranoia another word for realism; for Rousseau, the hostile suspicion which swelled within him after 1762 was rooted in an all-too-real persecution waged on theological, political and intellectual fronts.

Given this turn of events, Rousseau's request of pardon in *Emile* seems particularly prescient and all the more compelling. As contemporary readers armed with historical hindsight, we are surely poised to grant him reprieve. Still, before doing so we must answer two questions: what, specifically, were the theological and political paradoxes put forth, and why were they necessary to his thought, as he so forthrightly claimed?

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¹³³ Cranston, *The Solitary Self: Jean-Jacques Rousseau in Exile and Adversity*.

Emile holds the dubious distinction of being Rousseau's most controversial book. Burned and banned for impiety in 1762, critics were especially incensed by its third-person *Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar*. A substantial section of Book IV, this deistic sermon preached two particularly unpopular paradoxes: the pressing need for religious tolerance, and the Pelagian heresy that man was naturally innocent. If these proved to be Rousseau's most threatening ideas, their exposition was not without precedent. He had argued analogous points eight years prior in the *Discourse on Inequality*. Presented as searing socio-political critique, Rousseau's *Second Discourse* tempered a deeply critical genealogy of human history with the radical optimism of a doctrine of natural goodness.

Even then, Rousseau understood the dangers in making such claims. He began the *Discourse* with a declaration of courage: the questions raised within its pages were "not proposed by those who are afraid of honoring the truth."¹³⁴ The Genevan had no such fear; but to honor *veritas*, he first abandoned the facts.¹³⁵ Without a hint of irony, he urged his readers to follow him, to

begin by setting all the facts aside, for they do not affect the question. The Researches which can be undertaken concerning this Subject must not be taken for historical truths, but only for hypothetical and conditional reasonings better suited to clarify the Nature of things than to show their genuine origin.¹³⁶

Rousseau's logic here offers yet another paradox, a rejoinder to the scientific method popularized by his Enlightenment peers. But it also reflects a methodology privileged

¹³⁴ *Second Discourse*. CW III.18; OC III.131.

¹³⁵ By contrast, Bloom writes that in *Emile*, "Rousseau banishes poetry altogether and suppresses all lies." (E 8) As noted above, this is not entirely accurate. Rousseau was, indeed, a self-proclaimed "friend of truth." But his relationship with the arts and fiction reflects deep ambivalence rather than categorical condemnation. Rousseau clearly appreciates arts which serve a specific social function (such as the education of virtue).

¹³⁶ *Second Discourse*. CW III.19; OC III.132-133.

throughout his works: namely, the use of subjective memory in writing political philosophy. The clearest example is that of his autobiography. Halfway through the text Rousseau himself reminded us that the “first part [of *The Confessions*] was written entirely from memory and I must have made many errors in it. Forced to write the second from memory also, I will probably make many more.”¹³⁷ Recent scholarship has confirmed greater historical accuracy than Jean-Jacques would have us believe, yet the discrepancies to which he drew our attention have been verified.¹³⁸ Even more dramatically, scholars have described in detail the dissonance between Rousseau’s ideal vision of Geneva and the city in practice in works such as *Letters Written From the Mountain*, *Letter to d’Alembert*, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, and the dedicatory epistle to the *Second Discourse*.¹³⁹

For Rousseau, these inaccuracies actually served a distinct purpose. As he reiterated in *Emile*, facts are not always useful in teaching virtue. He gleaned this lesson from ancient Pagan histories, epic works of men like Plutarch “filled with views which one could use even if the facts which present them were false.”¹⁴⁰ His age, by contrast, ignored the vitality of this lesson. “Critical erudition absorbs everything, as if it were very important whether a fact is true, provided that a useful teaching can be drawn from it.”¹⁴¹ In their haste to compile and systematize knowledge, the encyclopedic *lumières* discounted the pedagogical value of fabled

¹³⁷ *The Confessions*. CW V.233; OC I.277.

¹³⁸ By far the most impressive of such efforts is Raymond Trousson and Frédéric S. Eigeldinger, *Rousseau au jour le jour: Chronologie*. Although certainly not aligned with the spirit Rousseau here articulates, the *Chronologie* is a remarkable feat of scholarship tracing nearly every day in the life of Jean-Jacques, and detailing what he did, where he went, and with whom he corresponded.

¹³⁹ See: Miller, *Rousseau: Dreamer of Democracy*, pp. 93-96; Benjamin Barber, “How Swiss is Rousseau?” *Political Theory*, Vol. 13, No. 4, November 1985.

¹⁴⁰ *Emile*. E 156; OC IV.415.

¹⁴¹ *Emile*. E 156; OC IV.415.

histories. Unlike the dissemination of cold facts, tales of glorious deeds—of Spartan rigor, of Robinson Crusoe’s self-sufficiency¹⁴²—serve the most noble of aims: they lead by example, allowing us to revel in reveries of greatness. “Critical erudition” might enhance our knowledge of science or refine philosophic discourse, but it contributes little to the subject of instituting virtue amongst individuals in a corrupted society.¹⁴³

Such was the scope of Rousseau’s ambition. By his own admission, education had less to do with child-rearing than the pursuit of a more enlightened social order. Rousseau reiterated this point in the *Letters Written From the Mountain*, insisting that “[i]t is a question of a new system of education the plan of which I offer to the examination of the wise, and not of a method for fathers and mothers, about which I never dreamed.”¹⁴⁴

Emile—like Plato’s *Republic*—taught us how to reclaim virtue amidst a society in decline. Rousseau pointed us towards this very connection in Book I: “Do you want to get an idea of public education? Read Plato’s *Republic*. It is not at all a political work, as think those who judge books only by their titles. It is the most

¹⁴² Rousseau makes countless glowing references to Sparta throughout his works. *Robinson Crusoe*, the story of solitary virtue *par excellence*, is the first and only book Emile reads: “Since we absolutely must have books, there exists one which, to my taste, provides the most felicitous treatise on natural education. This book will be the first that my Emile will read... What, then, is this marvelous book? Is it Aristotle? Is it Pliny? Is it Buffon? No. It is *Robinson Crusoe*.” E 184; OC IV.454-455.

¹⁴³ Rousseau uses this standard of general merit in his own defense in *Letters Written From the Mountain*. “My God, what would happen if, in a great work full of useful truths, lessons of humanity, piety, and virtue, one was allowed to go looking with a malicious precision for all the errors, all the equivocal, suspect, or ill-considered propositions, all the inconsistencies that amid the detail can elude an Author overburdened with his material, overwhelmed by the numerous ideas it suggests to him, distracted from some by the others, and who can hardly assemble in his head all the parts of his vast plan?” Even the Gospel, Rousseau concludes, would fare poorly in the face of such “slandorous analysis.” CW IX.150-151; OC III.708-709. From a moral standpoint, intent is more significant than execution. As Rousseau writes in the *Reveries* (Fourth Promenade), “Only the intention of the speaker gives them their worth and determines their degree of malice or goodness.” CW VIII.32; OC I.1029.

¹⁴⁴ *Letters Written From the Mountain* (Fifth Letter). CW IX.211; OC III.783.

beautiful educational treatise ever written.”¹⁴⁵ As in *Emile*, Plato presented a model of how to live virtuously. And like Rousseau, he employed myth to teach this difficult lesson.¹⁴⁶

Methodology notwithstanding, Socrates opened Book X of the *Republic* by emphasizing the dangers of poetry. *Poesis*, he reminded us, was misleading; it provided only seductive simulacrums of ideal forms. Even the works of “tragic poets... seem to maim the thought of those who hear them and do not as a remedy have the knowledge of how they really are.”¹⁴⁷ Socrates’ objection echoed his belief that philosophers must always prefer true wisdom to a pale or distorted shade; anything less, particularly an imitative art, distracts us from our pursuit of the good.

For Socrates, “[t]he maker of the phantom, the imitator” was essentially superficial; he “understands nothing of what is but rather of what looks like it is.”¹⁴⁸ Imitation was a form of “wizardry”; it ruled from the throne of *doxa*, tended towards imprudence, and reflected a fundamental disunity of the soul (the dissonance between reality and appearance).¹⁴⁹ Poetry was also dangerous because it unleashed excessive spiritedness: “we give ourselves over to following the imitation; suffering along with

¹⁴⁵ *Emile*. E 40.

¹⁴⁶ In the *Laws*, Plato’s Athenian counters those who “opine that the gods exist, but scorn and neglect human affairs.” (900b) Against “him who loves to censure the gods for neglect,” he first uses force before conceding that “he needs also, as it seems to me, some words of counsel to act as a charm upon him.” (903b) To do so, the Athenian evokes Odysseus and the myth of transported souls to illustrate his lesson. Myth here plays a vital role in the philosophic education, persuading where force alone cannot. (903b-905d) See: Plato, *Laws*, R. G. Bury, tr. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926), pp. 353, 363-371. See also: Miller, *Rousseau: Dreamer of Democracy*, pp. 92-104.

¹⁴⁷ *The Republic* X.595b. (Bloom 277) All quotes are taken from: Plato, *The Republic of Plato, Second Edition*, Allan Bloom, tr. (New York: Basic Books, 1968 & 1991).

¹⁴⁸ *The Republic* X.601b (Bloom 284).

¹⁴⁹ See: *The Republic* X.602d, 603a-c. (Bloom 285-287).

the hero in all seriousness, we praise as a good poet the man who most puts us in this state.”¹⁵⁰

The Athenian sage seemed to draw a Manichaean line. Yet immediately after, he introduces Homer¹⁵¹ as neither a philosopher nor an imitator, but a class in-between “able to recognize what sorts of practices make human beings better or worse in private and in public.”¹⁵² Homer is redeemed from the status of phantom-menace because he both understood and *taught* virtuous conduct: “it is told that Homer, while he was himself alive, was in private a leader for education for certain men who cherished him for his intercourse and handed down a certain Homeric way of life to those who came after.”¹⁵³ His art possessed normative value because it lighted the path to pursue higher goods.

Rousseau’s simultaneous (and at face value, awkward) embrace of truth and ‘dismissal’ of facts fulfils a similar purpose. For Rousseau, pseudo-fictionalized histories conjured visions of *possible* virtue unrealized in his modern world. Tales of inspired heroism, epic wisdom, or ideal polities offered heuristic models that both inspired appreciation and urged action.¹⁵⁴

Socrates—and, for that matter, the poetic Plato—demonstrated this dynamic by evoking the myth of Er. The latter part of *Republic*’s Book X recounts this fable

¹⁵⁰ *The Republic* X.605d (Bloom 289).

¹⁵¹ This follows Socrates’ condemnation of Homer in Book II: “we mustn’t accept Homer’s—or any other poet’s—foolishly making this mistake about the gods” being “the cause of everything” for humans. See: *The Republic* II.379c-d (Bloom 57).

¹⁵² *The Republic* X.599d (Bloom 282).

¹⁵³ Plato adds that “Pythagoras himself was particularly cherished for this reason, and his successors even now still give Pythagoras’ name to a way of life that makes them seem somehow outstanding among men.” *The Republic* X.600a (Bloom 283).

¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, Rousseau believes such fictions to possess meaningful truths. “Fictions which have a moral purpose are called allegories or fables; and as their purpose is or ought to be only to wrap useful truths in easily perceived and pleasing forms, in such cases we hardly care about hiding the *de facto* lie, which is only the cloak of truth; and he who merely sets forth a fable as a fable in no way lies.” *Reveries* (Fourth Promenade). CW VIII.32; OC I.1029.

of a warrior's descent into a demonic place where souls must choose hosts to inhabit. Odysseus, remembering the honor of past deeds, wisely claims "the life of a private man who minds his own business."¹⁵⁵ This story is one of redemption that demonstrates through allegory the significance of sound judgment in both this and the next life.¹⁵⁶ Socrates' company learns a persuasive lesson of agency—"[t]he blame belongs to him who chooses, god is blameless"¹⁵⁷—and are reminded of mankind's challenge "always to choose the better from among those that are possible."¹⁵⁸ In so doing, Odysseus demonstrates the practical benefits of wisdom and the eternal repercussions of choice.

Regardless of the facts, the myth is useful if the lesson holds. As Socrates tells Glaucon, "a tale was saved and not lost; and it could save us, if we were persuaded by it, and we shall make a good crossing of the river of Lethe and not defile our soul."¹⁵⁹ Rousseau was perhaps more concerned with this life than the next,¹⁶⁰ but the point he undoubtedly drew from the *Republic* stands: parable can offer a powerful tool of learning.¹⁶¹

Unlike poetry for Plato, or theater and the hollow speech of *philosophes*, Jean-Jacque's historical conjecture serves a practical and virtuous aim: an education committed to social transformation. *Reverie* acts as a heuristic device, a pseudo-fictional means of posing both clear and present problems (our history of decline) and

¹⁵⁵ *The Republic* X 620c (Bloom 303).

¹⁵⁶ It is worth noting that Rousseau also accepted the immortality of the soul.

¹⁵⁷ *The Republic* X.617e (Bloom 300).

¹⁵⁸ *The Republic* X.618b-c (Bloom 301).

¹⁵⁹ *The Republic* X.621b-c (Bloom 303).

¹⁶⁰ We must, however, bear in mind that Rousseau placed increasing faith in future redemption as the persecution of his works and person increased: in an afterlife, in the annals of history, from readers. As we will later see, this was particularly evident in his posthumously-published *Reveries*.

¹⁶¹ Readers should compare this position to Rousseau's assessment of the arts in his *Letter to d'Alembert* and the *First Discourse*..

viable solutions (sociopolitical reform). Epic histories encourage a process of discovery and improvement by painting vivid canvasses of how life *might have been* and how it *ought to be*. In Rousseau's own works, this dual purpose serves a single end: teaching humankind to enact a better future as both individuals and citizens.¹⁶² As he writes near the end of *Emile*, if "[t]he golden age is treated as a chimera,... What, then, would be required to give it a new birth? One single but impossible thing: to love it."¹⁶³ Such love—of our fellow citizens, of society, of mankind's future—begins precisely with the courage to dream the virtuous dream.

At this point, skeptical readers may charge Rousseau with the very crimes he imputes to theologians and academicians. If his philosophical musings indeed present "a reality to be encountered, experienced, and savored,"¹⁶⁴ why are they not also guilty of vain or misguided perfectionism? The answer lies in an indelicate balance. If Rousseau embraces myth as a form of pedagogy, his idealized images—of Geneva,

¹⁶² Judith Shklar takes a grim view of Rousseau's worldview, one which she believes "offers no occasion for happiness or civic virtue." Shklar ends her book with this overstatement: "When he called upon his readers to choose between man and the citizen he was forcing them to face the moral realities of social life. They were asked, in fact, not to choose, but to recognize that the choice was impossible, and that they were not and would never become either men or citizens." (p. 214) This is misleading in two significant ways. First, Rousseau's concept of moral individualism is coterminous with society in the sense that morality is nonexistent in the state of nature. The duties and relations born of citizenship constrict and pervert individual goodness, particularly in large cosmopolitan cities such as Athens and Paris. But Rousseau's vision of virtue also finds fruition within societies—whether those of quaint Geneva, or the self-contained community under Wolmar's watchful eye (in *Julie*), or through the general will. His attempt to apply *The Social Contract* to the politically-challenged nation of Poland also illustrates an effort to institute a greater measure of virtue under less-than-ideal conditions. Still, in her *Appendix*, Shklar notes the dismal failures of Emile and Sophie to reenter society in *Les Solitaires*: "The happy end of *Emile* is false,... and Emile's character cannot reveal itself until he *really* becomes a man, that is, a suffering victim." (p. 235) Again, it is hard to argue against the extreme difficulty of living virtuously within society. It is quite another thing to take this as evidence that Rousseau condemns the human condition to one of permanent, necessary suffering. At the very least, readers must reconcile this conclusion with the abject optimism of his Pelagianism, and the sincerity of his efforts to promote political reform. If this tension is irreconcilable, it still suggests Rousseau is a dialectician rather than an abject pessimist. See: Shklar, *Men and Citizens*. For a more balanced assessment of Rousseau's sense of futility as an idea later adopted by nineteenth-century conservatives, see: Starobinski, p. 100.

¹⁶³ *Emile*. E 474.

¹⁶⁴ Barber, "How Swiss is Rousseau?" p. 477

of Poland, of society—are always moderated by blunt honesty. The Church demands abject deference. Philosophy cultivates egregious hubris. Rousseau’s worldview, by contrast, combines both critical realism and active idealism; he worked within the boundaries of the actual in outlining the horizons of the possible. This is why Poland may yet democratize, even though the nation fulfilled so few of the essential tenets outlined in *The Social Contract*. This is why theater—so deadly a threat to virtuous Geneva—must be accepted in cosmopolitan Paris, a city already given to sin. As for society, he writes to Voltaire, “a time comes when the evil is such that the very causes that gave birth to it are necessary to prevent it from becoming larger. It is the sword that must be left in the wound for fear that the wounded person will die when it is removed.”¹⁶⁵ In dreaming of a better future, Rousseau is always nagged by this sword in his side.

This is not simply dramatic overstatement; virtuous reform *necessarily* begins with such an honest awareness of man *as he is*. As described in the preface to the *Second Discourse*, “[t]he most useful and least advanced of all human knowledge seems to me to be that of man; and I dare say that the inscription of the Temple of Delphi alone contained a Precept more important and more difficult than all the thick Volumes of the Moralists.”¹⁶⁶ Know thyself! Political philosophers must invoke the Oracle’s inscription.¹⁶⁷ As with Socrates, wise or useful speculation proceeds only from self-knowledge.¹⁶⁸ It is from this understanding of the “very Nature of man,...

¹⁶⁵ *Réponse à Voltaire*, September 10, 1755. CW III.106; OC 227.

¹⁶⁶ *Preface to the Second Discourse*. CW III.12; OC III.122.

¹⁶⁷ Readers should consult Socrates’ description of the Delphic injunction in *Apology* 20D-22E. See: Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*, pp. 49-51.

¹⁶⁸ By contrast, Tracy Strong argues that for Rousseau it is “precisely ‘becoming someone else’ that enables him to know himself.” “The purpose of knowing himself is not in the end *self*-knowledge,” but a means of painting “a portrait of himself as he is, as a human being... [that] will then be available

his constitution and his state, that the principles of that science [of natural right] must be deduced.”¹⁶⁹ Likewise, as Rousseau later asserts in the *Social Contract*, only by understanding “men as they are” might we deduce “laws as they can be.”¹⁷⁰

No mean feat, studying man involves a good deal of conjecture. Philosophers possess a meager understanding of nature, and “one notes the little agreement which prevails on this important matter among the various Authors who have discussed it.”¹⁷¹ Yet neither this lack of consensus, nor the difficulty of the enterprise, deterred Rousseau. As he wrote in the *Preface to the Second Discourse*,

The same study of original man, of his true needs, and of the fundamental principles of his duties, is also the only good means one could use to remove those crowds of difficulties which present themselves concerning the origin of moral inequality, the true foundations of the Body politic, the reciprocal rights of its members, and a thousand similar questions as important as they are ill explained.¹⁷²

Genealogy, we are reminded, is an essentially negative enterprise. It looks backwards and reveals problems, as in Nietzsche’s exposé of Judeo-Christian morality and Foucault’s histories of punishment and sexuality.¹⁷³ For Rousseau, genealogy is also

to others.” Strong uses this argument to debunk the possible conclusion that Rousseau is engaging in a precursory form of identity politics. Perhaps. But as I argue here, self-knowledge is a necessary starting point for species-knowledge, without which prescriptive politics are untenable. Rousseau’s image of himself certainly provides a pedagogical model for others. Yet structurally, in the *Second Discourse* for example, self-knowledge precedes the transformation of society (the phenomenon Strong labels “becoming someone else”). Simply put, to envision reform, we must first understand the subject of reform. For Rousseau, this clarity begins with following the Delphic injunction. See: Tracy B. Strong, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Politics of the Ordinary, New Edition*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), p. 17.

¹⁶⁹ *Preface to the Second Discourse*. CW III.13; OC.III.124.

¹⁷⁰ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.131; OC III.351.

¹⁷¹ *Preface to the Second Discourse*. CW III.13; OC III.124.

¹⁷² *Preface to the Second Discourse*. CW III.15; OC III.126.

¹⁷³ See: Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, tr. (New York: Random House, 1967); Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Alan Sheridan, tr. (New York: Random House, 1979); Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, Robert Hurley, tr. (New York: Random House, 1978).

practical and prescriptive.¹⁷⁴ Exploring our origins and development allows us to contrast our unfettered selves in nature with our denatured political identities. In turn, we can define and distinguish between natural and political rights, natural freedoms and political obligation. Virtuous political reform demands understanding our present woes, which logically follows the study of our physical, social and moral evolution.¹⁷⁵

There is an additional motive at play in Rousseau's use of speculative history, one that returns us to the problem of paradox. In his narrative of the fall, he challenged the Christian ontology of Original Sin as a false opinion. To pacify an audience which accepted Adam's legacy as gospel truth, Rousseau qualified his counter-narrative as conjecture. As he described,

Religion commands us to believe that since God Himself took Men out of the state of Nature immediately after creation, they are unequal because He wanted them to be so; but it does not forbid us to form conjectures, drawn solely from the nature of man and the Beings surrounding him, about what the human Race might have become if it had remained abandoned to itself.¹⁷⁶

Rousseau here understood "religion" as Christianity. Scripture taught us that God banished man from Eden. Our fall was our fault, the result of a sinfully curious (and

¹⁷⁴ Interestingly, Robert Nozick—whose worldview is fairly categorized as antithetical to Rousseau's own—makes a similar claim. As Nozick argues, "State-of-nature explanations of the political realm are fundamental potential explanations of this realm, and pack explanatory punch and illumination, even if incorrect." Additionally, "We learn much by seeing how the state could have arisen, even if it didn't arise that way. If it didn't arise that way, we would also learn much by determining why it didn't; by trying to explain why the particular bit of the real world that diverges from the state-of-nature model is as it is." As with Rousseau, Nozick's endeavor is not, by his own description, necessarily accurate. A state-of-nature argument may not explain every event in the real world. Actual events may well deviate from this theoretical model. But even if nature and state, theory and event, follow divergent paths, investigating this schism is itself revealing, and necessary in defining the state's legitimacy. See Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1974), pp. 4, 6, 8-9.

¹⁷⁵ As Rousseau writes in *The Confessions*, "[t]o establish the duties of man one must go back to their principle." CW V.77; OC I.91.

¹⁷⁶ *Second Discourse*. CW III.19; OC III.133.

curiously sinful) nature, and the imperfection of our less-than-divine, errant free will. Yet because God crafted us, this fateful descent conformed to His divine design. Papal logic therefore placed Original Sin above reproach; challenging the notion was tantamount to attacking the will of the “Author of all things.” Undeterred, Rousseau identified a loophole. This doctrine of Original Sin came from Scripture *as interpreted by man*. As another mere mortal, was he not also free to speculate? Was this not the very enterprise undertaken by the Church itself in cultivating such myths? And if freed from the punitive fable of a vengeful God, he wondered, what might we look like? How might we shape our future, and wherein lies the key to our redemption?

For starters, we must redress the guilt of crimes imputed to us by the Christian narrative. It is precisely on this point of intrinsic goodness that papists *and* philosophers have erred. Hobbes, for example, incorrectly concluded that “because man has no idea of goodness [in the state of nature] he is naturally evil; that he is vicious because he does not know virtue.”¹⁷⁷ In typically paradoxical fashion, Rousseau argued precisely the contrary, outlining his first concise doctrine of natural goodness. This goodness is defined by its innocence, sheltered in a natural state from the pernicious effects of society and social interactions. In this pre-moral, pre-human state, envy, hubris, and the most destructive human passions have yet to be born. We feel only simple *amour-de-soi* and *pitié*.

Pitié, a “natural feeling,” fulfills several functions: it

contributes to the mutual preservation of the entire species. It carries us to the aid of those whom we see suffer; in the state of Nature, it

¹⁷⁷ This is a slightly misleading description of Hobbes, for whom man in nature was morally neutral and aggressively self-interested. *Second Discourse*. CW III.35; OC III.153.

takes the place of Laws, morals, and virtue, with the advantage that no one is tempted to disobey its gentle voice; it will deter every robust Savage from robbing a weak child or an infirm old man of his hard-won subsistence if he himself hopes to be able to find his own elsewhere.¹⁷⁸

The Hobbesian state of nature portrayed a war of all-against-all waged by calculating, rationally self-interested individuals.¹⁷⁹ For Rousseau, Hobbes' confusion was conceptual. He imputed denatured developmental faculties (reason, avarice) to natural creatures. Our natural state was plagued by none of these vices. More precisely, vice (*and* virtue) followed societal development, particularly civic interactions, mores, and laws. Rousseau's depiction of the natural state was by contrast a benign condition of individuals characterized by instinctual self-preservation (*amour-de-soi*), and bound by an innate recognition of interdependence, the intuition that survival is somehow linked to that of one's fellow creatures (*pitié*).

Rousseau gleaned a golden rule from these concepts, one that supplanted "that sublime maxim of reasoned justice, *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*" with "this other maxim of natural goodness, much less perfect but perhaps more useful than the preceding one: *Do what is good for you with the least possible harm to others*."¹⁸⁰ We possess natural sentiments of both self-preservation and connectedness to our species. This combination of *amour-de-soi* and *pitié* provides a

¹⁷⁸ *Second Discourse*. CW.III.37; OC.III.156.

¹⁷⁹ From *De Cive*, Chapter I, "In men's mutual fear," §12: "...it cannot be denied that men's natural state, before they came together into society, was War; and not simply war, but a war of every man against every man." Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne, trs. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 29. From *Leviathan*, Part I, Chapter 13: "Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as if of every man, against every man." Hobbes, *Leviathan, Revised Edition*, Richard Tuck, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 88.

¹⁸⁰ *Second Discourse*. CW.III.37-38; OC.III.156.

pre-moral code which, unlike juridical law, we instinctively obey to mutually beneficial results.

“In a word,” Rousseau argued, “it is this Natural feeling, rather than in subtle arguments, that we must seek the cause of the repugnance every man would feel in doing evil.”¹⁸¹ The evidence of our capacity to cohabitate lies inscribed in our very natures. Where a justification based upon “subtle argumentation” requires reason and reflection, Rousseau’s proofs were unmediated by the intellect. His argument speaks directly to our hearts, *and* may be confirmed by the mind. It intuitively makes *sense*. And it assumes, of course, that humankind is not sinful by nature.

Long before the *Savoyard Vicar*, then, Rousseau was preaching a form of Pelagianism.¹⁸² His vision of reform—of creating more virtuous bonds in an unnatural world, thereby reinstituting our natural freedom—presupposed this positive foundation of natural goodness. Freed from Adam’s legacy, we might drastically improve our fates; an innocent nature suggested nothing less. This assertion that untainted by society, we would seek what is best for ourselves *and* those around us, therefore preceded the more explicit denial of Original Sin found in *Emile*. But the essential charge remained: the problem of vice is social, and therefore of man’s making, not ontological, or of God’s making. Adam’s legacy was swiftly debunked, replaced by an *unnecessarily* self-incurred fall.

Vice came from without, from the advent of social relations in denatured societies. How, then, did society emerge?¹⁸³ Humankind, increasing in numbers, aligned in herds, free associations held together by passing needs, limited obligations,

¹⁸¹ *Second Discourse*. CW III.38; OC III.156.

¹⁸² For a further discussion of this connection see Chapter 3 below.

¹⁸³ For Rousseau’s full account see: *Second Discourse*, CW III.43-55; OC III.164-179.

and immediate interests. From this occurred the “first revolution”: the familial unit, where language and conjugal love develop. Families over time evolved into tribes, which in turn gave rise to social distinctions and morality, virtue and vice. The turning point occurred when “[t]he first person who, having fenced off a plot of ground, took it into his head to say *this is mine* and found people simple enough to believe him.”¹⁸⁴ This concept of private property, the true foundation of civil society and an idea born slowly over time, led us to “forget that the fruits belong to all and the Earth to no one.”¹⁸⁵ It also transformed natural inequalities into social inequalities. The stronger and the smarter, for example, used these natural benefits to acquire property, and establish and secure social institutions that privileged the fruits of their labors. The dangerous pride of possessive self-interest subsequently took root, and the rest, as they say, is history—woeful, at that.

Rousseau’s narrative was received by many as the pessimistic polemic of a deranged luddite. Prodded by his paradoxes, people not only vilified the Genevan; they also misread him. He was most commonly charged with promoting a retarding socialism, with seeking to send us back to egalitarian nature, tails between our legs. As Voltaire put it, “[o]ne acquires the desire to walk on all fours when one reads your work.”¹⁸⁶ But Rousseau’s ideas were far more threatening. In an age of progress and perfectionism, he dared to propose that human development had ambivalent consequences. To Christian nations, he had the temerity to reject Original Sin. And against the upper classes, he attacked property generally and vested interests specifically. His pessimism and optimism alike were affronts to the age.

¹⁸⁴ *Second Discourse*. CW III.43; OC III.164.

¹⁸⁵ *Second Discourse*. CW III.43; OC III.164.

¹⁸⁶ *Letter from Voltaire to Rousseau* (August 30, 1755). CW III.102; CC III.317.157.

Rousseau made plain that humankind neither should nor can (by definition) return to a pre-human existence. We might and *must*, however, redirect the miserable course of our history. We must redouble our efforts not on an impossible return, but on social solutions which redeem and protect natural freedom and goodness, while correcting the damage wrought of artificial inequalities.

* * * * *

If history offers any indication, the odds of success seem unlikely. After all, our fall was steady and precipitous; reversing this trend requires nothing less than social reformation. On these points, the *Second Discourse* is unequivocal. Redressing our self-incurred wrongs calls for a radical reeducation, a pedagogy which both inures us to and recasts the social relationships which subject our freedom to the tyrannies of inequality and opinion.

It is thus that Rousseau's educational treatise necessarily employs paradox. Not only does he challenge the educational paradigms of his age, he questions the very mechanisms of society, the very essence of contemporary opinion. Chained by adverse attachments and desires, individuals might reclaim their natural goodness only by first resisting the coercive pull of social relations. To reverse our fall we must strike at the heart of our misery, challenging opinions such as Original Sin (which leave us hopelessly at God's post-mortem mercy), but also the opinions of our fellow creatures (which cultivate perverse passions and destructive desires).

If *The Social Contract* envisioned a good society to promote natural goodness, *Emile* wondered how individuals may preserve their goodness in a bad society. We quickly learn that the well-educated individual—one raised in accord with nature—must be sheltered from harmful influence. As Rousseau advised in Book II of *Emile*, “the first education ought to be purely negative. It consists not at all in teaching virtue or truth but in securing the heart from vice and the mind from error.”¹⁸⁷ Education is negative in the defensive sense: it guards individuals against external corruption. Such resistance is possible only if we allow children to develop their natural instinct and judgment. “Reason alone teaches us to know good and bad,” Rousseau writes. “Conscience, which makes us love the former and hate the latter, although independent of reason, cannot therefore be developed without it.”¹⁸⁸ Conscience (emotion and will), not reason (mind and intellect) provides humankind with a natural moral compass.¹⁸⁹ As the Vicar reminds, “I have only to consult myself about what I want to do. Everything I sense to be good is good; everything I sense to be bad is bad.”¹⁹⁰ Conscience, that “innate principle of justice and virtue according to which, in spite of our own maxims, we judge our actions and those of others as good or bad,”¹⁹¹ is nonetheless

timid; it likes refuge and peace. The world and noise scare it; the prejudices from which they claim it is born are its cruellest enemies. It flees or keeps quiet before them. Their noisy voices stifle its voice and prevent it from making itself heard. Fanaticism dares to counterfeit it and to dictate crime in its name. It finally gives up as a result of being dismissed.”¹⁹²

¹⁸⁷ *Emile*. E 93.

¹⁸⁸ *Emile*. E 67.

¹⁸⁹ In this, Rousseau follows a classically voluntarist trope which identifies the will (and not the intellect) as humankind’s most Divine faculty.

¹⁹⁰ *Emile*. E 286.

¹⁹¹ *Emile*. E 289.

¹⁹² *Emile*. E 291.

If Rousseau presupposed human goodness, he also assumed society's perverseness. Conscience, a timid woodland creature, must therefore be nurtured in nature away from the prejudices of the cruel, noisy world.

Given this corrupting dynamic of social interactions, people require compelling force to follow their natural instincts. Until they are capable of clear reasoning and sound judgment, pupils must be unknowing subjects discouraged from acquiring social attachments. In Rousseau's ominous words, "Let him always believe he is the master, and let it always be you who are. There is no subjection so perfect as that which keeps the appearance of freedom. Thus the will itself is made captive."¹⁹³

Emile's positive moral lessons are also drawn in negative terms: "The only lesson of morality appropriate to childhood, and the most important for every age, is never to harm anyone."¹⁹⁴ We have already seen this "golden rule" introduced in the *Second Discourse*. In addition, it draws upon a discussion of justice in the *Republic* in which Socrates concludes that "it has become apparent to us that it is never just to harm anyone."¹⁹⁵ Rousseau also follows Luther, who argued that good works (which we can control, unlike motives or good faith) are no measure of a grace free of

¹⁹³ *Emile*. E 120. Sentences such as these do not help Rousseau's reputation as a totalitarian thinker. The tutor-pupil role clearly evokes Antonio Gramsci's definition of hegemony as a coercive system strengthened by its insidiousness. In Rousseau's defense, the control of a young pupil's will is necessary for two reasons: first, youth are not yet developmentally capable of sound judgment and self-rule; and second, his extreme stance is dictated by an extreme situation. Raising people according to nature while shielding them from society demands holding their uncorrupted wills in captivity. The Tutor must "force" Emile to be free in order to manipulate his pupil to follow his natural conscience. Readers should compare this to *The Social Contract*, I.VII: "whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the entire body; which means only that he will be forced to be free." CW IV.141; OC III.364.

¹⁹⁴ *Emile*. E 104.

¹⁹⁵ *The Republic* I.335e (Bloom 13).

contrivance.¹⁹⁶ Good works do not offer a normative moral standard, for “[w]ho does not do good? Everybody does it—the wicked man as well as others. He makes one man happy at the expense of making a hundred men miserable; and this is the source of all our calamities.”¹⁹⁷ What is good for one is not necessarily good for many.

Recalling Rousseau’s study of inequality, this simple reminder reinforces the dangers of particular self-interest, even when acted upon under the auspices of public good. The architects of Lisbon, for example, may well have believed that they were serving society’s best interests in building the eighteenth-century equivalent of skyscrapers. But the earthquake of 1755, and the subsequent damage precipitated by the destruction of such unnatural constructions, multiplied our misery.¹⁹⁸ As such, Rousseau concludes that caution is sometimes in order. “The most sublime virtues are negative” because restraint reduces the likelihood that we will harm our fellows.¹⁹⁹

Finally, even the Savoyard Vicar begins his sermon with a negative lesson. In matters of speculation he learns “to limit my researches to what was immediately related to my interest, to leave myself in a profound ignorance of all the rest, and to worry myself to the point of doubt only about things it was important for me to

¹⁹⁶ For Luther, a good heart (not good works) reveals the depth of human faith. If anything, good works are misleading, allowing those of impure motives an easy way of serving God. Clearly for Luther, “ease” had no role in true piousness. As he writes in *Preface to the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Romans*: “God judges according to your inmost convictions; His law must be fulfilled in your very heart, and cannot be obeyed if you merely perform certain acts.” And in *The Freedom of a Christian*: “Let this suffice concerning the inner man, his liberty, and the source of his liberty, the righteousness of faith. He needs neither laws nor good works but, on the contrary, is injured by them if he believes that he is justified by them.” From: *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, pp. 20, 66-67.

¹⁹⁷ *Emile*. E 105.

¹⁹⁸ Readers should consult Pope’s *Essay on Man* and Voltaire’s *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*.

¹⁹⁹ *Emile*. E 105.

know.”²⁰⁰ Against the vain grasp of philosophers generally and the dysfunctional doubt of skeptics specifically, he preaches the practical value of self-imposed limits.

Following these examples, Emile’s tutelage may be described as negative in at least four respects. First, it reflects a critical assessment of contemporary education. Second, it understands virtue as a passive value (doing “no harm” rather than doing “some good”). Third, it describes development as a process of sheltering and resistance. And fourth, it guards against the cultivation of unnatural desires, urges defined by the weakness of unnecessary want or perceived lack.

In brief, Emile’s education finds fortitude through resistance. As late as Book IV Jean-Jacques notes with some satisfaction that “[o]pinion, whose actions [Emile] sees, has not acquired its empire over him.”²⁰¹ Soon after, he writes that “[i]t suffices that, enclosed in a social whirlpool, [Emile] not let himself get carried away by either the passions or the opinions of men.”²⁰² And finally, we are asked “who in the world is less of an imitator than Emile? Who is less governed by ridicule than the man who has no prejudices and does not know how to concede anything to those of others?”²⁰³ In other words, who is more immune to the empire of opinion than the Tutor’s prized pupil?

Rousseau’s education inures Emile to the opinions of others, and for as long as possible. But why? Prior to Vicar’s *Profession of Faith*, he justifies this practice in terms reminiscent of the *Second Discourse*’s fall. Amidst a discussion on love,

²⁰⁰ *Emile*. E 269. Rousseau reiterates this claim (in his “own” voice) in the *Reveries*. Describing how he overcame the doubts instilled in him by his *philosophe* peers which left him “not wiser, more learned, or of better faith than when I settled all those great questions,” he concludes that “I therefore limited myself to what was within my reach, without getting myself involved in what went beyond it.” See: *Reveries* (Third Promenade). CW VIII.25; OC I.1021-1022.

²⁰¹ *Emile*. E 244.

²⁰² *Emile*. E 255.

²⁰³ *Emile*. E 331.

Rousseau describes the evolution of human attachment. We begin with hearts naturally overflowing with love, yet lacking companionship. In a desire to secure reciprocal adoration, we acquire a mistress. This new intimacy in turn creates a correlative need for friendship. From this apparently harmless (and undoubtedly natural) pull, we suddenly fall prey to the opinions of others. “With love and friendship are born dissensions, enmity, and hate. From the bosom of so many diverse passions I see opinion raising an unshakable throne, and stupid mortals, subjected to its empire, basing their own existence on the judgment of others.”²⁰⁴

The turn of events is somewhat shocking. We start, innocently enough, with pure hearts and motives, and end under the rule of *doxa*’s “unshakable throne,” trapped by the attachments to which we were naturally drawn. Here, then, is the evolution of *amour-de-soi* to *amour-propre* described in social terms, with no less disastrous consequences. To preserve Emile’s freedom and natural goodness, the Tutor must occlude his reliance upon others. The impressionable youth must rely upon the singular judgment of his ward until he is capable of self-legislation. He must be sheltered from society until he is strong enough to resist its pull.

The pupil must also avoid exposure to that which his mind cannot yet comprehend. This is why the Tutor withholds religion. “I foresee how many readers will be surprised at seeing me trace the whole first age of my pupil without speaking to him of religion,” Rousseau writes. “At fifteen he did not know whether he had a soul. And perhaps at eighteen it is not yet time to learn it; for if he learns it sooner than he ought, he runs the risk of never knowing it.”²⁰⁵ The argument is logistical,

²⁰⁴ *Emile*. E 215.

²⁰⁵ *Emile*. E 257.

not theological. Children are not developmentally capable of understanding religion, any more than they are capable of fine reasoning or self-rule. Rousseau therefore does “not see what is gained by teaching [catechisms] to children, unless it be that they learn how to lie early.”²⁰⁶ The mysteries of God and divinity are lost on youth for whom, “[a]t the age when everything is mystery, there are no mysteries strictly speaking.”²⁰⁷ If “[t]he obligation to believe assumes the possibility of doing so,” children are simply not able.²⁰⁸

Where the *Second Discourse* painted in broad, sweeping strokes, *Emile* is much more specific. The Church requires children to learn lessons contrary to nature.²⁰⁹ It inundates pupils with ideas which they cannot yet comprehend. This emphasis on rote repetition reflects a more significant problem: by privileging their own hollow platitudes, the Church fails to cultivate genuine faith. If “[i]t is especially in matters of religion that opinion triumphs,” there is no greater culprit than a Church whose righteous opinions take the dangerous form of aggressively intolerant gospel.²¹⁰

By Rousseau’s description, papists also ground their authority on a tautology: “The Church decides that the Church has the right to decide.”²¹¹ The certainty of their judgment is matched only by the circularity of their logic. More dangerously, the dogmatism of this conviction breeds despotic conformity. Presaging Rousseau’s own censure, the Vicar asks “what is there to do? If someone dared to publish among

²⁰⁶ *Emile*. E 257.

²⁰⁷ *Emile*. E 257.

²⁰⁸ *Emile*. E 257.

²⁰⁹ Given Rousseau’s description of nature as a product (and reflection) of the divine will, this also represented an offense against God.

²¹⁰ *Emile*. E 260.

²¹¹ *Emile*. E 304.

us books in which Judaism were openly favored, we would punish the author, the publisher, the bookseller. This is a convenient and sure policy for always being right. There is a pleasure in refuting people who do not dare to speak.”²¹²

Rousseau was no deliberative democrat, as the *Social Contract* makes clear.²¹³ But neither was he a totalitarian.²¹⁴ The general will is by definition the will shared by all in common, not the will imposed upon us from above. By contrast, the Church would have us believe that they alone possess true faith, and criminalize opposing visions. But if we simply look around us, piety is evident in all peoples. “Cast your eyes on all the nations of the world, go through all the histories,” the Vicar urges. “Among so many inhuman and bizarre cults, among this prodigious diversity of morals and characters, you will find everywhere the same ideas of justice and decency, everywhere the same notions of good and bad.”²¹⁵ Even in Pagan cultures has “[t]he holy voice of nature, stronger than that of the gods, made itself respected

²¹² *Emile*. E 303-304. In an author’s note, Rousseau earlier takes the Stoics to task for similarly discounting the value of discussion: “Plutarch reports that the Stoics maintained, among other bizarre paradoxes, that in an adversary proceeding it was useless to hear the two parties.” (E 302n) The reference is to Plutarch’s essay “On Stoic Self-Contradictions,” 1034E: “Against him who said / Nor give your verdict till you’ve heard both sides / Zeno asserted the contrary with an argument something like this: The second speaker must not be heard whether the former speaker proved his case (for then the inquiry is at an end) or did not prove it (for that is tantamount to his not having appeared when summoned or to having responded to the summons with mere gibberish); but either he proved his case or he did not prove it; therefore, the second speaker must not be heard. After he had propounded this argument, however, he continued to write against Plato’s Republic, to refute sophisms, and to bid his pupils to learn dialectic on the ground that it enables one to do this. Yet either Plato proved or did not prove what is in the Republic, and either way it was not necessary but was utterly superfluous and vain to write against it. The same thing can be said about sophisms also.” See: Plutarch, *Moralia: Volume XIII, Part II*, Harold Cherniss, tr. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 427 & 429.

²¹³ See: *The Social Contract* Book II, Chapter 3, “Whether the General Will Can Err.”

²¹⁴ For “totalitarian” critiques of Rousseau see: Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*; Crocker, *Rousseau’s Social Contract*; Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*; Huizinga, *The Self Made Saint*. Arthur M. Melzer also argues that Rousseau promotes an “antiliberal” democracy “not to establish, but to eliminate men’s rights against the state. All private, natural rights are to be totally alienated in exchange for political rights, for a share in control over the absolute and unlimited state.” At the very least, this reading misappropriates Rousseau’s strict division between general (public) and particular (private) rights, and obscures his definition of the general will as the will that each individual shares in common. See: *The Natural Goodness of Man*, p. 109.

²¹⁵ *Emile*. E 288.

on earth and seemed to regulate crime, along with the guilty, to heaven.”²¹⁶ Well before the Church, reverence of nature—much like *pitié* and more than polytheism—served a normative social function in the form of a regulative moral code. Its authority was rooted not in the sophistication of human reasoning, but in a simple appreciation of the natural world order. It is in such divine—not human—creations that we may find evidence of the “Author of all things,” and glean necessary inspiration from His perfection.

By forcing us to comply to their mediated vision, Christians ironically debase faith and breed intolerance. Speaking on salvation, the Vicar explains: “*You must believe in God to be saved.* This dogma badly understood is the principle of sanguinary intolerance and the cause of all those vain instructions that strike a fatal blow to human reason in accustoming it to satisfy itself with words.”²¹⁷ But salvation, like true piety, is more than a matter of rote repetition: “if in order to obtain it, it is enough to repeat certain words, I do not see what prevents us from peopling heaven with starlings and magpies just as well as with children.”²¹⁸

If the Church parades dogma as spirituality, reduces worship to compulsory recitation, and peddles it to unawares, what is Rousseau’s alternative vision of true religion? What is genuine faith? It appears as a form of both rational appreciation and an awareness of the limitations of human reason: appreciating God’s creation, and accepting the incomprehensible wisdom of his order. As the Vicar expounds,

²¹⁶ *Emile*. E 288-289.

²¹⁷ *Emile*. E 257.

²¹⁸ *Emile*. E 257. For a similar argument, readers should also consult Montaigne’s *Of Pedantry* in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, Donald M. Frame, tr. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), pp. 97-106.

The greatest ideas of the divinity come to us from reason alone. View the spectacle of nature; hear the inner voice. Has God not told everything to our eyes, to our conscience, to our judgment? What more will men tell us? Their revelations have only the effect of degrading God by giving Him human passions. I see that particular dogmas, far from clarifying the notions of the great Being, confuse them; that far from ennobling them, they debase them; that to the inconceivable mysteries surrounding the great Being they add absurd contradictions; that they make man proud, intolerant, and cruel; that, instead of establishing peace on earth, they bring sword and fire to it. I ask myself what good all this does, without knowing what to answer. I see in it only the crimes of men and the miseries of mankind.²¹⁹

Teaching by negation, we learn that religion is *not* a particularly misguided vision of God. It is not the imposition of human passions upon a Being surely devoid of these qualities. If the Author of all things is characterized by immaculate order, contradictions and confusions do not describe him. If he is a wise, benevolent deity who loves his creations, his worship should not facilitate cruel intolerance. To understand religion we must first reject the dogmas preached by an historically violent church and look to nature, whose wonder and coherent order is a clearer testament of God's grace than any catechism.

Although spoken by the Vicar, the charge reveals themes consistent with Rousseau's own beliefs. Foremost amongst them is his abhorrence of mediation.²²⁰ Papists have attributed vengeance and justified bloodshed to the service of a surely munificent God. And in so doing, they have committed an act of vile transubstantiation, imputing their own malicious, particular interests to the One they purportedly serve. As Rousseau later writes in the first of his *Letters Written From the Mountain*, his enemies "put themselves in the place of God to do the work of the

²¹⁹ *Emile*. E 295.

²²⁰ In *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, Starobinski persuasively identifies this love of immediacy and detestation of mediation as the unifying theme of Rousseau's *oeuvres*.

Devil.”²²¹ Entranced by “that dangerous *amour-propre* which always wants to carry men above his sphere,” they have lowered God to ours while placing themselves in-between.²²²

The empire of their opinion knows no bounds. The papacy has extended their rule to the heavens. They would have us accept their interpretation as gospel, and God as their puppet. “As soon as peoples took it into their heads to make God speak, each made Him speak in its own way and made Him say what it wanted,” the Vicar laments.²²³ Yet “[i]f one had listened only to what God says to the heart of man, there would never have been more than one religion on earth.”²²⁴

This argument for religious tolerance is grounded in a classically voluntarist belief in the impenetrable mysteries of divinity. Neither Rousseau, nor the Vicar, nor M. de Beaumont can tell us who God really is, what He looks like, or when He speaks only to us.²²⁵ And unlike mythic Pagan history, such interpretations have served decidedly unvirtuous ends. Instead of solidifying universal brotherhood, the Church has used dogma and Scripture to create divisions, to bring blood and fire upon the earth of God’s creation. Instead of affirming the truth that God created us all, they

²²¹ *Letters Written From the Mountain* (First Letter). OC III.697; CW.IX.141.

²²² *Emile*. E 296.

²²³ *Emile*. E 295.

²²⁴ *Emile*. E 295.

²²⁵ Although voiced by the Vicar, this mirrors Rousseau’s own condemnation of miracles as vain presumptions that God would take the time to speak directly to select individuals. In this position, Rousseau follows Malebranche, who argued that God was defined by simplicity and consistency in His perfection, not intrusion into the particular affairs of humankind. In *Elucidations of the Search After Truth*, Malebranche says that sinners “would have God perform miracles in their favor and not follow the ordinary laws of grace.” More directly, in the Fourth of his *Dialogues on Metaphysics*, he states that “God never performs miracles. He never acts by special volitions contrary to His own laws which Order does not require or permit. His conduct always manifests the character of His attributes.” Miracles clearly “do not follow His general laws.” (Eighth Dialogue) From: *Nicolas Malebranche: Philosophical Selections*, Steven Nadler, ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1992), pp. 109, 188-189, 242. For a convincing, clear and thorough discussion of this connection see: Riley, *The General Will Before Rousseau*.

cultivate violent artificial boundaries. Yet rather than accept such deadly interpretations as God's word, we can (and should) intuitively *feel* His existence, and recognize our common bond as His creations. This heartfelt sentiment is confirmed by observation: by appreciating the world of his making, by finding examples of pious love and fraternity in peoples of all nations.

Following in the Protestant tradition, the Vicar reminds us to

not confuse the ceremony of religion with religion itself. The worship God asks for is that of the heart. And that worship, when it is sincere, is always uniform. One must be possessed of a mad vanity indeed to imagine that God takes so great an interest in the form of the priest's costume, in the order of the words he pronounces, in the gestures he makes at the altar, and in all his genuflections.²²⁶

Worship is a matter of individual conscience, not conformity to sectarian ceremony.

If God truly presides over this and all other worlds, his adulation should be equally unconstrained. This, after all, "is the duty of all religions, all countries, all men" who serve a (or more precisely *the*) single deity.²²⁷

Beyond that, particular forms of worship are somewhat arbitrary.²²⁸ "The

²²⁶ *Emile*. E 296.

²²⁷ *Emile*. E 296

²²⁸ Paolo Toscanelli (1397-1482), an accomplished mathematician and scholar, believed that ships could sail to Asia far more quickly than had previously been imagined by altering traditional westward routes. He presented a chart of his findings to the Court of Portugal. Although King John II was wary, Christopher Columbus—then a mapmaker and entrepreneur—was intrigued. This conclusion reaffirmed the work of classical geographer Marinus of Tyre, the travelogues of Venetian merchant Marco Polo, and Columbus' own study of the Apocrypha (particularly II Esdras 6:42) that argued the earth was almost entirely (six-sevenths) composed of land. Armed with Toscanelli's support, Columbus eventually convinced the Spanish monarchy (under Ferdinand) to fund an Oriental expedition. This voyage, of course, led him *eastwards*, where he "discovered" a New World inhabited by "savages"—peoples untouched by Christianity.

Columbus' accidental discovery led many others to follow his mistaken path to the Americas. One of these explorers was his friend Amerigo Vespucci who, beginning in 1502, made several voyages to the New World. It was during this period that Vespucci's cousin Agostino served as both confidant and assistant to Niccolò Machiavelli (assisting, for example, on an ambitious engineering project of Machiavelli's between 1503 and 1506). Machiavelli, famously denounced by Jesuits, Humanists, Roman Catholics, counter-Reformationists, Huguenots, and French Monarchists (amongst others) was seen as an intellectual threat to the political and philosophical dominance of Christian theology in the pre-Enlightenment world.

faith of children and of many men is a question of geography.”²²⁹ Choice of religion is likewise “the effect of chance; to blame [non-Catholics] for it is iniquitous. It is to reward or punish them for being born in this or in that country. To dare to say that God judges us in this way is to insult His justice.”²³⁰ Intolerance is anything but pious. As the Vicar elaborates, “[i]f there were a religion on earth outside of whose worship there was only eternal suffering, and if in some place in the world a single mortal of good faith had not been struck by its obviousness, the God of that religion would be the most iniquitous and cruel of tyrants.”²³¹

But He is not. His justice and grace are both indisputable and universal, and must be confirmed by appealing to conscience and reason, not dogmatism and

Machiavelli’s godlessness was widely assumed, although (like Rousseau) he is more accurately described as anticlerical. His *Discourses* identify religion as a crucial catalyst to ancient Rome’s republican virtue: Numa, not Solon, is credited with this accomplishment. Machiavelli’s blatant hostility towards the church is storied, but his connection to the New World explorers often goes unnoticed. The two, I believe, are related.

Christianity assumed a privileged role amongst religions because it was said its missionaries graced the entire world. The exposure of a vast continent of peoples untouched by the hand of a Christian God severely tested this supposition. Machiavelli, closely privy to such information, was certainly aware of this demystifying discovery, whose influence may be gleaned in his denouncement of the Church. The argument Rousseau makes in the *Emile* on the arbitrariness of particular forms of worship—written especially in rebuttal to the Papal order—similarly assumes that non-Christians may be pious, even if they are ignorant of the Church raised in His name. In so doing, he draws upon precisely such discoveries of heathen lands.

Consider this argument posed by the Vicar: “Two-thirds of mankind are neither Jews nor Mohammedans nor Christians, and how many million men have never heard of Moses, Jesus Christ, or Mohammed? This is denied; it is maintained that our missionaries go everywhere. That is easily said. But do they go into the still unknown heart of Africa,... to deepest Tartary,” Japan or Asia? “Do they go into the immense continents of America, where whole nations still do not know that peoples from another world have set foot in theirs?” (E 304) The conclusion is glaring: Christianity is *just another religion*. This argument rests specifically upon the discovery of “the immense continents of America” (also the subject of Rousseau’s early opera, *La Découverte du Nouveau Monde*), and its non-Christian communities. Given this evidence, deism is the *only* form of piety capable of reconciling the universal truth God’s existence with the seeming savagery of a continent untouched by the Church’s mores.

Readers should consult: Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella, trs. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), I.11, pp. 50-53; *La Découverte du Nouveau Monde*. OC I.815-841; CW X.12-36. In addition, I am grateful to Roger D. Masters for bringing this matter to my attention, and taking the time to sketch its significance.

²²⁹ *Emile*. E 258.

²³⁰ *Emile*. E 297.

²³¹ *Emile*. E 297.

revelation. As the Vicar quips, it matters not what the Church commands in questions of faith: “I need reasons for subjecting my reason.”²³² Demonstrative proofs, not human mediation, reveal the will of God: “When I believe what he says, it is not because he says it but because he proves it. Therefore the testimony of men is at bottom only that of my own reason and adds nothing to the natural means God gave me for knowing the truth.”²³³

The Church therefore deals in the worst form of sophism, a manipulation of opinion which compromises our highest, most natural relationship. Consider the following paragraph, written with an indignation worthy of Luther:

Apostle of the truth, what then have you to tell me of which I do not remain the judge? “God Himself has spoken. Hear His revelation.” That is something else. God has spoken! That is surely a great statement. To whom has He spoken? “He has spoken to men.” Why, then, did I hear nothing about it? “He has directed other men to give you His word.” I understand: it is men who are going to tell me what God has said. I should have preferred to have heard God himself. It would have cost Him nothing more, and I would have been sheltered from seduction.²³⁴

This is a mock dialogue in both senses of the word. Taking the form of a hypothetical conversation with a cleric, it ridicules the idea that only a select few may mediate and dictate our relationship with God. The very suggestion leaves the Vicar incensed. “What! Always human testimony? Always men who report to me what other men have reported! So many men between God and me!”²³⁵ So many fallible human opinions perverting the practice of faith! So many meddlers confounding the natural purity of conscience!

²³² *Emile*. E 297.

²³³ *Emile*. E 297.

²³⁴ *Emile*. E 297.

²³⁵ *Emile*. E 297.

Rousseau was not simply nay-saying. He firmly believed that dogmatism discouraged the pious adoration of God. In dictating the terms of external worship, papal intrusion into corporeal affairs carries unjust consequences. Specific religious customs, accidents of history and geography but also the free interpretations of the Divinity's creatures, are a matter settled amongst citizens, not man and God. "As to the external worship," the Vicar advises, "if it must be uniform for the sake of good order, that is purely a question of public policy; no revelation is needed for that."²³⁶ Religious custom boils down to a political question of "public policy"; its form must support the "good order" of strong civil society.²³⁷

This is a social prescription, one which presses upon us the necessity for living in mutual harmony. Papists (like philosophers) sacrifice society's general welfare for the sake of their own (particular) interests. Rousseau, by contrast, insists that all forms of religion must be allowed so long as they encourage virtuous (general) order. Conversely, sects which divide and conquer must be banned; they serve neither God nor state. This becomes a problem of practical fruition, one whose difficulty is compounded by Rousseau's own claims. We are innocent by nature and literally guilty by association. Our fall was ushered by our interactions in society, which corrupt individual virtue. If the empire of opinion (a ripe phenomenon amongst religious sects) is particularly blameworthy, how might we find a religion which retains its civic benefits while avoiding its social pitfalls?

Rousseau outlined his solutions in *Emile* and *The Social Contract*, but his prescriptions were overshadowed by the grating character of his paradoxes. Jean

²³⁶ *Emile*. E 296.

²³⁷ Readers should consult Rousseau's concept of Civil Religion in *The Social Contract*, IV.8 and the *Geneva Manuscript*, Book III, both of which I discuss elsewhere in detail.

Starobinski illuminates the irony of this predicament, noting that “Rousseau made himself a stranger to man in order to protect against the alienation that makes men strangers to one another.”²³⁸ His “renunciation of the world’s vanities and... conversion to ‘another moral world’²³⁹ took Rousseau not toward the Church but toward the forest and the life of the vagabond.”²⁴⁰ It would still take Rousseau some ten years after *Emile*’s publication to return to the woods for good, to reintroduce himself to botany and write his final works. But his estrangement began long before his final retreat.

This rift was facilitated by Rousseau’s paradoxical nature. It was also a consequence of his inimitable style, the force and certainty with which he pursued truth and exposed ideas. Prior to 1762, Rousseau nonetheless cast blame elsewhere. It was the opinions of *others* which rightfully deserve the loaded label of paradox. As he asserted in the Introduction to his *Fragments politiques*,

But since I have learned through experience the damage that demonstrated propositions can suffer from being called Paradoxes, I am relieved to remove this resource in advance from those who have none other to argue against what I am about to prove. I warn them, therefore, that it is the opinion I attack that should be called a paradox, as unheard of to this day as it is ridiculous and pernicious; and that by refuting this soft and effeminate Philosophy whose convenient maxims have won it so many supporters among us, I only add my voice to the cry of all nations, and plead the cause of common sense as well as that of society.²⁴¹

This dual cause—of (naturally) good sense and social welfare—inspired his contrariness. In the matter of religion, piety is essential and true to both society and

²³⁸ Starobinski, p. 41

²³⁹ Starobinski’s reference is to the following quote: “Une grande révolution qui venoit de se faire en moi, un autre monde moral qui se devoiloit à mes regards...” *Reveries* (Third Promenade). OC I.1015; CW VIII.20.

²⁴⁰ Starobinski, pp. 39-40.

²⁴¹ *Political Fragments* 1. CW IV.46; OC III.518.

human nature. God's very magnificence—the scope and effect of his will—reminds us of his existence, and our mutually-supportive duties as His creations. But the faith of men as dictated by the Catholic Church discourages such reverence.

As Rousseau's paradoxes grew even more specific they elicited more severe consequences. Just as he was compelled to write as he felt, so did he feel compelled to defend himself from mounting attacks. In the self-justifying works following 1762, he turned to readers to rescue him from the judgments levied by his age. Too many men of power had too many interests vested in the ideas he opposed. This, finally, is why Rousseau begged "common readers" to pardon him his paradoxes; they were, supposedly, written on behalf of the people to whom he appealed.

His request of pardon still belies the insistence of his prose. Paradox was *necessary*, Rousseau writes—and therefore not, strictly speaking, a matter of choice. But common people—of society, and also of God and nature—might still choose. Pardon him? The choice is ultimately left neither to Church nor state nor academy, but to fellow men and citizens. Defending the Vicar's deism in his *Letters Written From the Mountain*, Rousseau makes the question characteristically blunt:

[T]he doctrine in question is good for the human race and bad for its oppressors. In what absolute category must it be put? I have faithfully stated the pros and cons. Compare and choose.²⁴²

Was he right or wrong, decent or vicious, worthy of praise or blame? In the end, was his belief in man's innocence, society's guilt, and divine beneficence of any use to the human race? Such are the choices laid before us. Our response either redeems Rousseau's perplexing paradoxes, or casts them from the realm of virtuous reverie to one of well-forgotten memory.

²⁴² *Letters Written From the Mountain* (First Letter). CW IX.146; OC III.702.

Chapter 3: A Claim of Innocence

And so it was “not I” that brought this about “but sin which dwelt in me,” sin resulting from the punishment of a more freely chosen sin, because I was a son of Adam.

—Augustine, *Confessions*²⁴³

True innocence is ashamed of nothing.

—Rousseau, *Emile*²⁴⁴

When Rousseau begged us to pardon his paradoxes,²⁴⁵ the request was hardly hollow. The proliferation of contradictory thought—at odds with others and, according to critics,²⁴⁶ itself—gives us ample opportunity to do so. The decision is still ours to make, but before either granting or denying Rousseau his wish we might revisit his most compelling, controversial (and hence potentially unpardonable) paradox: namely, innocence.

²⁴³ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Henry Chadwick, tr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), VII.x.22, p. 149. Augustine’s Biblical reference is to *Romans* 7:17, 20.

²⁴⁴ *Emile*. E 217.

²⁴⁵ *Emile*. E 93; OC IV.323.

²⁴⁶ Most notably J.H. Huizinga who, citing Benjamin Constant, writes that Rousseau “thrashes about among a thousand contrary ideas as in a dark night lit up by frequent flashes of lightening.” *Rousseau: The Self-Made Saint*, p. 268. Huizinga also lists amongst Rousseau’s notable critics William Ralph Inge, a Christian Platonist and dean of London’s St. Paul’s Cathedral. “The influence of this sentimental rhetorician,” Inge wrote, “has perhaps been more pernicious than that of any other man who has ever lived.” Inge, *Christian Ethics and Modern Problems*. (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1930), pp. 249-250. French literary critic Jules Lemaître (“thanks to human credulity and stupidity no man had ever done more harm to mankind than the writer who, it seems, hardly knew what he was writing”) and François Mauriac, 1952 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature (“the modern era is rooted in his lies... It has taken a century and a half for his poison to accomplish its work”) likewise saw Rousseau’s legacy as catastrophic. See also: Jules Lemaître, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. (New York: The McClure Company, 1907); François Mauriac, *Trois grands hommes devant Dieu*. (Paris: Editions du capitale, 1930).

Throughout his works, Rousseau maintained his innocence in three crucial senses:²⁴⁷ as an *individual* whose writings revealed a uniquely good soul bared to the public; as a *human being*, an ontological claim that contradicted the orthodox Christian narrative of Original Sin; and as a *defendant*, a refutation of the charges levied against him following the publications of *Emile* and *The Social Contract*. Despite his paradoxes, Rousseau claimed his *oeuvres* were characterized by their consistency.²⁴⁸ A thread linking his most provocative positions, innocence offers a means of locating this continuity.

Such common ground is particularly helpful when reconciling Rousseau's religious and political beliefs. After all, his spiritual optimism (epitomized by his rejection of Original Sin) and social pessimism (revealed in his stark critiques of contemporary society and human history) seem to push readers in opposite directions. Rousseau framed the fall of humankind in decidedly Edenic terms as a genealogy of decline from a blissful natural state to one corrupted by illegitimate societal chains. Yet he based this dour history upon an optimistic heresy, a renunciation of Original Sin and correlative faith in the intrinsic goodness of man.

This paradoxical stance left him open to charges of hypocrisy. A virulent social critic who exalted human nature, Rousseau insisted that society had corrupted otherwise benevolent creatures. Marveling at the wonder of a natural world alienated by human artifice, he urged us to follow our God-given consciences and embrace our divinely-created natures. This is a refrain sung throughout Rousseau's writings, one

²⁴⁷ Together, this triple claim evokes the four major senses of innocence cited by the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "freedom from sin, guilt, or moral wrong in general" or "moral purity"; "freedom from specific guilt" or "not being guilty of that with which one is charged"; "freedom from cunning or artifice" or "guilelessness"; and "harmlessness, innocuousness."

²⁴⁸ As I later discuss, Rousseau makes this consistency central to his defense of *Emile*.

concisely captured in *Emile*'s famous opening line: "Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man."²⁴⁹ An individual uniquely attuned to this intrinsic goodness, Rousseau presented himself as a testament to the possibility of regeneration.²⁵⁰

Of course, as his autobiographical writings make clear, Jean-Jacques was no saint. Far from it, his life was characterized by impulsiveness and fluctuation, from his early abandonment of Geneva, to his rather capricious conversion to Catholicism, to his sudden epiphany on the road to Vincennes. He was also guilty of what is generally considered unsavory or immoral behavior: romantic affairs, indecent exposure, lies and theft. A man of such blatantly self-described faults who frequently succumbed to his overwhelming passions should hardly claim absolution from guilt. Yet for Rousseau, innocence was rooted in something deeper than acts: namely the goodness of our natural will, a faculty often led astray by social interactions.²⁵¹

Given his own suspect personal history, such self-exculpation proved unconvincing to the many who found him abjectly guilty of crimes against the church, his *patrie*, and his religion, and breaches of friendship, civic duty, and

²⁴⁹ *Emile*. E 37.

²⁵⁰ By this, I do not mean to suggest that Rousseau asks us to follow his life as a model. After all, it is not entirely evident that this is possible. Consider, for example, his emphasis upon his uniqueness (the prefatory note to *The Confessions* describes the work as "the only portrait of a man, painted exactly according to nature and in all its truth, that exists and that probably will ever exist"), and discrepancies between his own autonomous education (self-directed immersion and remarkable erudition) and that of *Emile*'s (which, under the guidance of a highly controlling tutor, actively discourages reading). I do believe that Rousseau reveals himself as a testament to the *possibility* of living more naturally. If he himself is an anomaly, his life is still exemplary, and therefore serves a heuristic purpose.

²⁵¹ As Rousseau writes in *Emile*, "let us set down as an incontestable maxim that the first movements of nature are always right. There is no original perversity in the human heart." By contrast, "there is not a single vice to be found in it of which it cannot be said how and whence it entered." Because the natural will never errs and all vice is artificially constructed, actions guided by inner sentiment follow innocent motives. A return to our innocent nature occurs only in society through this act of free will. *Emile*. E 92. For the foundation of this argument see: *Second Discourse*. CW III.36-38; OC III.155-157.

philosophic decorum. Condemned as an author, an individual, and a human being, his claim of innocence also constituted a self-defense. Pardoning Rousseau this paradox therefore determines his culpability—where he errs, where his accusers make legitimate claims, and (most broadly) where his renunciation of guilt informs a coherent philosophical vision rather than a convenient self-acquittal.

Whatever the verdict, Rousseau's triple claim of innocence can hardly be confined to a question of individual reputation. More than a matter of narrow interest, it underlies his faith in both religion as a virtuous moral guide and democracy as the self-rule of essentially good creatures. Do his caustic accusations and personal misdeeds compromise this optimism? More specifically, does his renunciation of Original Sin stand at irreconcilable odds with his deeply pessimistic view of human society? Or does Rousseau's paradoxical insistence unfold as a compelling catalyst for politico-theological reform?

To investigate these questions, we will begin by addressing Rousseau's testament of personal innocence particularly as revealed in his *Confessions*. Next we will turn to a discussion of Pelagianism as the foundation of his religious thought, a creed he most clearly develops in the voice of the Savoyard Vicar. We will then explore his response to the charges raised in the censure of *Emile*, a defense in which Rousseau reiterates both his individual and ontological innocence. After examining this concept in its three major guises, we will be poised to judge the coherence and cohesion of his claim. In so doing, we will determine not only whether we may pardon him his most illustrious paradox; we may also see how this controversial

notion illuminates the dialectic between spiritual perfectionism and secular pessimism so central to his political philosophy.

* * * * *

To read Rousseau as he requested we must allow him his manifold paradoxes while struggling to find unity between his many discourses and novels, letters and plays, treatises and personal reveries. Reading Rousseau therefore demands not simply a strong constitution; it also requires a good deal of patience. To hold him to his oft-repeated claims of consistency and honesty, utility and acuity, we must treat his massive *oeuvre* as an old Genevan watch: dissect it with courage and caution, while wondering whether the parts still fit a working whole.

Answers are far from self-evident. In different styles and tones Rousseau revealed sharply different takes on humankind's past (a descent from natural harmony to artificial subjugation), present (a disastrous empire of opinion guided by academic and papal hubris), and possible future (legitimizing the chains of our mutual attachments through radical democratic reform). The very faculties—free will, imagination, sociability—that contributed to our decline allowed us the possibility of redemption. This purported solution was further complicated by Rousseau's subversiveness: both his pessimistic realism and optimistic perfectionism were based upon stark critiques of his own age.

Rousseau's contentious, contradictory methodology clearly evokes the role of Socrates, the gadfly immortalized for his prodding attempts to awaken the great, lazy

beast that was Athens.²⁵² In delivering his social criticism as the accusations of a truth-seeking man, Rousseau likewise urged his peers to know—and question—themselves and the society of their making. Reform was hardly possible without honest self-assessment;²⁵³ this was the challenge pressed upon his audience as both individuals and members of society, and the first stage in reclaiming the hereditary fruits of our natural goodness.

To paint Rousseau as an Enlightenment-era Socrates is nonetheless hasty. After all, as Christopher Kelly reminds us, Rousseau was no Socrates.²⁵⁴ The Athenian never left his city's walls save for a brief military expedition and one conversation with Phaedrus;²⁵⁵ the Genevan, by contrast, spent most of his life away from his birthplace. Socrates accepted death by hemlock after his final, ill-fated apology; Rousseau never even stood trial, fleeing his home before Parisian authorities arrived to execute the Parlement's arrest warrant. The most telling difference, however, is revealed in a simple fact: in discussing his life and writings, Rousseau was wholly unapologetic.²⁵⁶ Not only did he justify the supposed misdeeds of his life, he made their candid revelation a testament of his individual innocence. Nowhere is this more clear than in his autobiography.

²⁵² As Socrates argues in *The Apology*, "It is literally true (even if it sounds rather comical) that God has specially appointed me to this city, as though it were a large thoroughbred horse which because of its great size is inclined to be lazy and needs the stimulation of some stinging fly." Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*, pp. 62-63. For a comparison of how Rousseau's shamelessness differs from that of Diogenes the Cynic (the "Socrates gone mad"), see Chapter 4 above.

²⁵³ For a fine summary of the scholarly debate surrounding Rousseau's ability to honestly appraise himself see: Kelly, *Rousseau's Exemplary Life: The "Confessions" as Political Philosophy*, pp. 5-8.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 54-57, 64-75.

²⁵⁵ See: Plato, *Phaedrus and the Seventh and Eighth Letters*, Walter Hamilton, tr. (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 21.

²⁵⁶ Socrates' own "apology" was clearly not devoid of ironic criticism. However, the very fact that he accepted the verdict of his peers greatly distinguishes him from Rousseau.

The subtitle to *The Neuchâtel Preface*²⁵⁷ of *The Confessions* claims to contain “the detailed account of the events of [the author’s] life, and of his secret feelings in all the situations in which he has found himself.”²⁵⁸ In its final printed version, Rousseau reiterates this declaration as a hypothetical monologue:

Behold what I have done, what I have thought, what I have been. I have told the good and the evil with the same frankness. I have been silent about nothing bad, added nothing good... I have shown myself as I was, contemptible and low when I was so, good, generous, sublime when I was so.²⁵⁹

That he presents these lines as the speech he will “loudly” deliver to God on his day of judgment is of no small consequence. Taken alone, this admission possesses a notable dearth of humility; when read as a proclamation of merit to “the Sovereign Judge” it sounds abjectly heretical.

After all, Augustine’s own archetypal *Confessions* eloquently espoused mankind’s unworthiness in relation to God. In the Saint’s narrative, salvation was a gift bestowed upon humankind solely by the mercy and grace of God. Man had little hope of incurring redemption by affecting His will, much less by fearlessly proclaiming innocence on Judgment Day. For Augustine the hallmark of human nature was inescapable guilt, a hereditary affliction levied against the descendents of Adam as punishment for Original Sin. Man could only hope for salvation through divine mercy, a fate stipulating unassertive deference before God. In stark contrast, Rousseau suggests that he has nothing to fear (much less regret) on his day of

²⁵⁷ This is the earlier, incomplete draft of *The Confessions*. Of the two completed editions—the “Geneva” and “Paris” manuscripts—neither is considered definitive. For an explanation see: CW V.xxxv.

²⁵⁸ *The Neuchâtel Preface to The Confessions of J.-J. Rousseau*. CW V.585; OC I.1148.

²⁵⁹ *The Confessions*. CW V.5; OC I.5.

judgment.²⁶⁰ When Kierkegaard later lamented Rousseau's conspicuous dearth of Christian humility, he surely had this episode in mind.²⁶¹ Was it not pride in a life well-lived, rather than the burdens of incurable sin, that Jean-Jacques trumpets at the gates of heaven?²⁶²

Even the non-God-fearing must cringe slightly at Rousseau's resoluteness. He is certain of his thoroughness, having revealed "what I have done, what I have thought, what I have been." He is convinced of his objectivity ("I have shown myself as I was"). He suggests that forthrightly admitting his "contemptible" deeds merits his salvation. And he delivers all of this in a defiant tone, begging the question of whether or not God, as Rousseau pictured Him, really appreciates anyone raising his or her voice in His presence. Yet such are the uncompromising terms of Rousseau's openness, a value championed from the outset of an autobiography whose author makes plain that he will hide nothing. The text itself is a realization of this transparency, a revelation of far more than the mere details of one man's life. As Rousseau declares to God, "I have unveiled my interior as Thou hast seen it Thyself."²⁶³ *The Confessions* is his testament, its readers his witnesses.²⁶⁴

Such grandiose claims seem to ignore the difficulty of self-revelation. As Philippe Lejeune reminds us, autobiography poses a distinct methodological problem:

²⁶⁰ See: *Reveries*. (Third Promenade). CW VIII.22; OC I.1019.

²⁶¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals* (4: 252-253). I address Kierkegaard's claim in further detail in Chapter 4.

²⁶² Compare this with Julie's description of her "Christian end" emboldened by a clear conscience. *Julie*. CW VI.586-589, 598; OC II.713-718, 729.

²⁶³ *The Confessions*. CW V.5; OC I.5.

²⁶⁴ Although this speech is ostensibly delivered before God such revelation is superfluous because, as Rousseau reminds us, God sees all. This is therefore a testament made before man, a declaration of innocence and not (as with Augustine) a public display of humility.

“Est-il possible de raconter sa vie?”²⁶⁵ Is it, he elaborates, possible to truly recall, disseminate, and articulate the essence (or even events) of one’s own life? Rousseau appears untroubled by the subjective complexity of his enterprise. Not only has he told his life’s story, he has peered within his very soul and “unveiled” his interior, revealing the insight of a gaze often exclusively attributed to divine beings.²⁶⁶ Furthermore, he challenges anyone who would cast aspersions. “Eternal Being,” he requests, “assemble around me the countless host of my fellows: let them listen to my confessions, let them shudder at my unworthiness, let them blush at my woes. Let each of them in his turn uncover his heart at the foot of Thy throne with the same sincerity; and then let a single one say to Thee, if he dares: *‘I was better than that man.’*”²⁶⁷

We must take the term “unworthiness” lightly, for little in these opening lines suggest anything of the sort. Rousseau is, in fact, claiming precisely the opposite. He *is* worthy: to stand before God, without shame or fear, openly touting the goodness of his bared soul. He has nothing to fear, not because he was better behaved than the next man. He has nothing to fear because he *is* like any man—exhibiting faults and failings, goodness and generosity—with one monumental caveat: he has looked within himself, and delighted in the natural innocence to which he is closely attuned. Augustine also looked inward, albeit to a decidedly different conclusion. Soul searching left the Saint with an ineradicable sense of shame. Bowed under the weight

²⁶⁵ Philippe Lejeune, *L'autobiographie en France, Deuxième Édition*. (Paris: Armand Colin, 1998), p. 58.

²⁶⁶ Judith Shklar discusses the all-knowing eye of Wolmar the atheist in great detail in *Men and Citizens*. The Vicar also claims similar insight: “I can observe and know the beings and their relations, I can sense what order, beauty, and virtue are, I can contemplate the universe and raise myself up to the hand which governs it.” *Emile*. E 278.

²⁶⁷ *The Confessions*. CW V.5; OC I.5.

of his own human sinfulness, he had little hope but to pay deference to the One whose goodness immeasurably surpassed his own, and dictated the course of his fate. By contrast, Rousseau drew courage from the insights borne of self-examination. Unveiling his soul revealed a source of solace in a corrupt world: an individual, a *human being*, whose natural innocence remained intact.

If Rousseau seems prone to self-glorification, his affirmation posed a far more compelling problem to Catholic authorities. It conveyed an abject heresy (conspicuous pride in human nature), one that sharply distinguishes *The Confessions* of Rousseau from that of Augustine. Although the works bear substantive and structural similarities,²⁶⁸ this fundamental difference divides them: Augustine is consumed by the certainty of his own guilt, while Rousseau bears little in the way of regret. More specifically, while Augustine holds himself (as both an individual and a descendent of Adam) accountable for his sinfulness, Rousseau attributes his own wavering will to “mitigating factors” beyond his control.²⁶⁹ Kelly wonderfully illustrates this schism by contrasting each author’s recollection of youthful misdemeanors.²⁷⁰ Reactions worth revisiting, consider first Augustine’s:

I wanted to carry out an act of theft and did so, driven by no kind of need other than my inner lack of any sense of, or feeling for, justice. Wickedness filled me. I stole something which I had in plenty and of

²⁶⁸ Lionel Gossman, “The Innocent Art of Confession and Reverie,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 7, No. 103 (Summer, 1978), p. 60. For a careful comparison of these works see: Ann Hartle, *The Modern Self in Rousseau’s Confessions: A Reply to St. Augustine*.

²⁶⁹ Kelly, p. 105.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-108. It is worth noting that Kelly uses a different example, focusing on Rousseau’s first theft (of asparagus). Kelly uses this to demonstrate the centrality of private property within Rousseau’s concept of injustice. Readers might compare this with Emile’s experience of ruining a farmer’s melon seeds by planting his own beans in the same soil. In *Emile*, both parties reach a mutually acceptable compromise, and thus learn how to navigate the difficult tension between self-interest and the common good. For Rousseau’s first theft (and candid discussion of his thieving techniques) see: *The Confessions*. CW V.27-30; OC I.32-36. For the beans and melons incident see: *Emile*. E 98-99.

much better quality. My desire was to enjoy not what I sought by stealing but merely the excitement of thieving and the doing of what was wrong.²⁷¹

The object of theft in question—pears from the tree of a plentiful vineyard—were carried off in a “huge load... not for our feasts but merely to throw to the pigs.” This seems a routine juvenile prank, quaint by contemporary standards and harmless enough to all save the pigs and perhaps a disgruntled farmer. But Augustine describes his actions as a “foul” example of “wickedness itself,” a testament to his “lack of any sense of, or feeling for, justice.” His recollections lead him to a humorless conclusion, one whose gravity far outweighs the physical act itself: “I loved the self-destruction, I loved my fall, not the object for which I had fallen but my fall itself. My depraved soul leaped down from your firmament to ruin. I was seeking not to gain anything by shameful means, but shame for its own sake.”²⁷²

In relatively light-hearted contrast, Rousseau opens his *Confessions* with a “short and veracious history of all my childish misdeeds.”²⁷³ Admitting to a doting upbringing (at the expense of his neglected older brother), Rousseau writes that “the children of Kings could not have been cared for with greater zeal than I was during my earliest years.”²⁷⁴ Idealized pampering notwithstanding, he still possessed “the flaws of my age; I was a babbler, a glutton, sometimes a liar. I would have stolen fruits, candies, food.”²⁷⁵ He even recalls “once having pissed into the cooking pot of one of our neighbors... while she was at church,” a memory that “still makes me

²⁷¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, II.iv.9, p. 29.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁷³ *The Confessions*. CW V.9; OC I.10. Although Rousseau elsewhere draws ample attention to his various misdeeds (including theft), this short paragraph marks *The Confessions*’ first mention of vice.

²⁷⁴ *The Confessions*. CW V.9; OC I.10.

²⁷⁵ *The Confessions*. CW V.9; OC I.10.

laugh.”²⁷⁶ This rather disgusting (and decidedly unneighborly) episode elicits only mirth in recollection, and immediately follows a claim of personal innocence oddly detached from the act to which he has just confessed: “I never took pleasure in doing harm, damage, in accusing others, in tormenting poor animals.”²⁷⁷

This comparison underscores the striking discrepancy with which each author holds himself accountable for his actions. What Augustine identifies as symptomatic of eternal, hereditary sin, Rousseau dismisses as the tomfoolery of a well-nurtured lad. What leads Augustine to grueling self-examination and a tortured assessment of his own depravity leaves Rousseau mildly amused. While Augustine interprets his theft as a microcosm for the failings of his entire species, Rousseau couches his “misdeeds” within a declaration of individual goodness, a natural quality cultivated by his loving upbringing amongst “the best people in the world.”²⁷⁸

Differences notwithstanding, we must recall that Rousseau’s *Confessions* adhere to Augustine’s formula in one decisive fashion: both works involve “a repudiation of worldly signs and pleasure, of art and literature; both offer themselves therefore not as art, but as inmost truth.”²⁷⁹ The 17th Century contributed its share of such autobiographical literature—most notably Duclos’ 1741 *Confessions du Comte de ****—which, as Lionel Gossman describes, “drew attention to the private personality, the inner life and time of the individual as opposed to the public events, the public personalities, and the external chronology and history, to which the

²⁷⁶ *The Confessions*. CW V.9; OC I.10.

²⁷⁷ Rousseau’s mention of “tormenting poor animals” seems particularly incongruous, unless we read in it a sly critique of Augustine (who had, as just noted, confessed to throwing pears at pigs). *The Confessions*. CW V.9; OC I.10.

²⁷⁸ *The Confessions*. CW V.9; OC I.10. Given his upbringing, Rousseau finds the very idea that he might have possessed a vicious nature to be inconceivable: “How could I have become wicked, since under my eyes I had only examples of gentleness, and around me only the best people in the world?”

²⁷⁹ Gossman, p. 60.

authors... bore witness.”²⁸⁰ Yet few before Rousseau had paraded their flaws with such simultaneous straightforwardness and obvious lack of regret. It was the unrepentant conclusions his quest unearthed, rather than the journey inwards, that most clearly distinguished him from the confessional tradition. He established a pattern of admission and qualification (revealing sundry details as pardonable reactions to external circumstances), shifting the source of accountability from indigenous failings to exogenous forces. Peer pressure, locked city gates, the sinful culture of Paris, a desire to please, honest self-assessment, and an overflowing heart explain (in order) his first theft, his leaving Geneva, his argumentative writings, his conversion to Catholicism, the abandonment of his children, and his romantic affairs. In each instance Rousseau exculpates himself, requesting that we judge him on his intentions rather than his actions.²⁸¹

Given his illustrious past, such a standard seems baldly self-serving. After all, Jean-Jacques was a naughty boy. We know this because he tells us, over many pages and through many incidents in *The Confessions*. Yet from the outset he initiates a trend that continues throughout the work: Rousseau is unrepentant. Because he never sought to harm (the maxim of his “golden rule” from the *Second Discourse*),²⁸² he can reflect upon misdeeds with a clear conscience. In examining and revealing his life he never pleads *mea culpa*, but rather reduces errant behavior to either developmental immaturity or weakness in the face of exogenous pressures. What

²⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 60.

²⁸¹ As Rousseau later writes in the *Reveries* (Fourth Promenade): “Only the intention of the speaker gives them their worth and determines their degree of malice or goodness.” CW VIII.32; OC I.1029.

²⁸² *Second Discourse*. CW III.38; OC III.156.

Augustine accepted as evidence of an intrinsically sinful nature, Rousseau deflects to forces external (and thereby foreign or alien) to himself.

By several accounts, this pattern of admission and rationalization presented the eighteenth century with a radically new vision of self-examination. As Lejeune writes, “Rousseau est le premier à s’apercevoir qu’il faudrait un ‘langage nouveau,’ et inaugure un critique des techniques du récit au nom du réalisme subjectif.”²⁸³ This generous assessment—one made by Rousseau himself in the famous first lines of *The Confessions*²⁸⁴—was not shared by those who found his “subjective realism” to be entirely more subjective than real. As Hérault de Séchelles wrote in 1800, Rousseau’s was an “errant life,” one “abandonnée aux hasard et aux passions.”²⁸⁵ This was a common charge amongst critics of the age who found such unbridled passion ill-suited for an author of his stature, let alone a self-proclaimed bearer of truth.²⁸⁶

More recently, Edgar Quinet reiterated and clarified this concern. “Les seuls livres dangereux pour moi sont ceux où l’on me donne comme réel ce qui ne l’est pas.”²⁸⁷ Rousseau was dangerous for precisely this reason. He presented interior narratives and reverie as objective manifestations of a truth more useful than

²⁸³ Lejeune also identifies Rousseau as a founding member of the first generation of a “new form of biography” which spoke in the first-person, emphasized training, displayed a pre-romanticist sensitivity, and demonstrated a deep involvement with the contemporary world. Lejeune, pp. 31, 24, 58.

²⁸⁴ “I am forming an undertaking which has no precedent, and the execution of which will have no imitator whatsoever. I wish to show my fellows a man in all the truth of nature; and this man will be myself. Myself alone.” *The Confessions*. CW V.5; CW I.5.

²⁸⁵ Hérault de Séchelles, *Voyage à Montbard*, (Paris: 1800), pp. 37-38. Quoted in Bernard Gagnebin, “L’Étrange accueil fait aux ‘Confessions’ de Rousseau au XVIII Siècle,” *Annales de la Société Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, Tome 38, 1969-1971 (Geneva: A. Jullien, Éditeur), p. 119.

²⁸⁶ For additional examples of this criticism see: Gagnebin, pp. 108-112, 121-123.

²⁸⁷ Edgar Quinet, *Histoire de mes idées*. (Paris: Flammarion, 1972), p 47.

empirical certainty.²⁸⁸ Echoing de Séschelles, Quinet finds such musings fundamentally irresponsible: they point us down a slippery slope of self-justification wherein hyper-subjective “feelings” are conflated with, and presented as, impartial “reality.” To be fair, Rousseau’s writings offer an anticipatory rebuttal. In an age ruled by the empire of opinion, the sophisticated logic of philosophers and the righteous dogma of papists were the real enemies of truth masquerading self-interest as certainty. Such adroit minds twisted supposedly objective facts to serve particularist agendas “good only at destructive criticism.”²⁸⁹ By contrast, Rousseau argued that his internal sentiments were uncontrived, and served only the common good. The certainty that Quinet finds perilously misrepresented might *only* be uncovered by looking inwards.

Amongst Rousseau’s contemporaries, this standard was typically (and in the case of Voltaire, sarcastically)²⁹⁰ dismissed as ill-conceived self-justification or inflated pride; far more menacing were his practical claims. In assailing private property, ridiculing scientific advancement, rejecting Original Sin, and calling for religious tolerance and legitimized self-rule, he threatened Church, state and Academy alike. His image as an anti-hierarchical thinker was only confirmed by *The Confessions*, a work that defied conventional boundaries of Enlightenment society

²⁸⁸ As Plutarch reminds us, facts are only valuable if they help to instill virtue. In Rousseau’s age, by contrast, “Critical erudition absorbs everything, as if it were very important whether a fact is true, provided that a useful teaching can be drawn from it.” *Emile*. E 156; OC IV.415. For further discussion of this position see Chapter 2 above.

²⁸⁹ *Emile*. E 268. The ensuing paragraph further discusses the limits of reason and the utility of imagination. Delivered by the Vicar, these lines conform to Rousseau’s hierarchy of human faculties.

²⁹⁰ Voltaire’s most famous quip against Rousseau followed the *Second Discourse*: “One acquires the desire to walk on all fours when one reads your work.” *Letter from Voltaire to Rousseau*, August 30, 1755. CW III.102; CC III.317.157. In a similar spirit, following the *Letter to d’Alembert*, Voltaire wondered if Rousseau had “become a priest of the Church?” Theodore Besterman, ed., *Voltaire’s Correspondence*. (Genève: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1953-1965), XIX.D7864.

and elicited shrill “disapproval of the author’s rejection of the neoclassical discriminations of noble and base, high and low, public and private, tragic and comic.”²⁹¹ As Gossman explains, Rousseau’s “candor about the details of his sexual life was not in itself shocking; what was, was the seriousness with which he treated them and asked the reader to treat them,” an approach that blatantly ignored traditional dismissals of the body as a crass domain ill-suited for philosophical inquiry.²⁹²

If Jean-Jacques was guilty of indecent exposure,²⁹³ Gossman locates a democratic impulse in his breach of propriety, a tacit valorization of common (in both senses of the word) experience. Rousseau’s somatic emphasis also offered a sharp rejoinder to Augustine, who had urged his audience to look beyond the corporeal world in anticipation of an eternal life freed from physical desire.²⁹⁴ For Augustine, the body was a symbol of man’s most visible weakness (concupiscence) and a reminder of our fall from grace and distance from God; physical shame was a logically pious stance given the sins of our flesh. His writings therefore take the body seriously only as a threat to salvation, an object of denial and repression, and a hereditary punishment levied upon man for Adam’s transgression. In defying this tradition Rousseau was not merely titillating his audience or challenging the literary

²⁹¹ Gossman, pp. 60-61.

²⁹² Ibid., pp. 60-61.

²⁹³ I use this term both literally and figuratively. In *The Confessions*, Rousseau admits to a penchant for seeking out “dark alleys, hidden nooks where I could expose myself from afar to persons of the opposite sex.” CW V.74; OC I.88-89. He was also charged with slandering the memories of upstanding *citoyens* such as Mme. de Warens by revealing unsavory details of his romantic affairs. As M. Geoffrey wrote in the *Année littéraire* (1783, V.vii.99-100), such candor was particularly indecent for “a Philosopher, a Sage, a Legislator of morals.” For examples of similar critiques see: Gagnebin, pp. 110-112, 121, 123.

²⁹⁴ This reflects a classical bias of philosophy as well, one epitomized by Plato (for whom wisdom was an absolute form encumbered by physical trappings). For a thorough overview of this problem see: Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

standards of a prudish élite. His elevation of somatic concerns reveals, more pointedly, a repudiation of the denigration of the corporeal life.²⁹⁵ Dwelling on his sexual proclivities, uncontrolled appetites, and sundry weaknesses was necessary given his commitment to revealing the truth. But such exposure also taught an affirmative lesson, one accessible to those of all walks of life: fear not our corporeal sins, for they are only skin-deep.²⁹⁶

At heart of Rousseau's argument is a faith in the innocence of human nature. Rather than teaching us to humble ourselves as woefully inadequate creatures before God, he urged us to follow his lead in *The Confessions*, to draw courage from our status as divine creations. Jean-Jacques' candor was therefore calculated or purposeful in that it lighted a hopeful path to reform. It was also deeply problematic, for it left him open to charges of blatant hypocrisy and gave detractors a convenient means of dismissing him.²⁹⁷ His authority as a moral critic lay in his relative lack of culpability. But by unveiling the sundry details of his life he presented the portrait of an individual objectively ill-suited to exculpate himself.

In his own defense, Rousseau reiterated his guiding principals (natural goodness, and a pursuit of truth that demanded unmitigated revelation) while deflecting the significance of his actions. In a world of corrupting attachments, he ascribed guilt to external sources. The radical implications of his rationalization

²⁹⁵ From his very first *Discourse*, Rousseau had argued that "the needs of the body are the foundations of society." *First Discourse*. CW II.5; OC III.6.

²⁹⁶ In this, Rousseau falls between Machiavelli and Nietzsche who both recognized "slavishness" in Christian morality. See: *Discourses on Livy*, II.2.159.

²⁹⁷ Rousseau was particularly insulted by this charge. As he asks Beaumont, "Why would I be a hypocrite, and what would I gain from being one? I attacked all particular interests, I aroused all factions against me, I upheld only the cause of God and humanity, and who cares about that?" Rousseau suggests that he would have been far less prosecuted if, following the *philosophes*, "I had openly declared myself in favor of atheism." *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.50; OC OV.964.

cannot be understated. In it we find a neophyte theory of political victimization, one that attributes blame to unjust social forms rather than intrinsically flawed beings.²⁹⁸ Nurture, not nature, is the culprit in this equation. As an individual raised in idyllic circumstances, Rousseau was uniquely nurtured to follow his nature, an exemplar of goodness particularly resistant to society's influence. His personal innocence therefore supports his claim of ontological innocence: the life he revealed to the public offered testament to his species' inherent worth.

This is the "truth" put before the audience to whom he bears his very soul, an argument pressed upon his peers. After all, Rousseau was far more anxious about being misjudged by men than God. If he begins his *Confessions* by testifying before the Sovereign Judge, he reminds us of the superfluity of this revelation. God sees us for who we are; this is why Rousseau is unafraid to assert his innocence in His presence. By contrast, human judgment is far more fallible, our reason woefully limited.²⁹⁹ This boundary is acutely evident in our comprehension of divinity, a failing discussed at length by the Savoyard Vicar in *Emile*. The Vicar chastises humankind for believing "we possess intelligence for piercing... [such] mysteries," when in fact "all we have is imagination." It is "through this imaginary world [that] each blazes a trail he believes to be good. None can know whether his leads to the goal [of salvation]. Nevertheless we want to penetrate everything, to know

²⁹⁸ Inge labeled this "sentimental humanitarianism" Rousseau's single worst contribution to the modern world, a "mawkish travesty of Christianity which transforms morality by basing it solely on pity, and transfers guilt from the individual to the state under which he lives. Man is always innocent, the government always guilty." (Inge, p. 250) Arthur Melzer offers a more judicious assessment, noting that Rousseau "initiates the philosophic tendency, which has dominated almost all subsequent thought, to understand the human problem in terms of historical, social, or environmental causes rather than natural or divine ones." Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, p. 17.

²⁹⁹ Compare with René Descartes' *Sixth Meditation in Meditations on First Philosophy, Revised Edition*, John Cottingham, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

everything.”³⁰⁰ Although raised by the Vicar, this concern articulates a problem later posed in *The Confessions*.³⁰¹ Not only do we believe ourselves capable of comprehending God, we parade these “imaginary” visions as righteous, intolerant truths. This vanity is twofold: because the limits of our reasoning prevent us from clearly comprehending the divine state we personalize God, reducing Him to an extension of our own particular predilections and worldviews.³⁰² As Rousseau elaborates,

In general, believers make God as they are themselves, the good make him good, the wicked make him wicked; the devout who are spiteful and cholerick see only Hell because they would like to damn the whole world: loving and gentle souls hardly believe in it.³⁰³

The reduction of God to the self-image of the worshipper is therefore morally ambiguous. It can have wicked (for the wicked) and just (for the just) consequences. Given his scathing criticism of Catholic dogma, Rousseau likely had papists in mind as those who “damn the whole world” to Hell. But he also poses a positive alternative, the “loving and gentle souls” who place faith in a benevolent deity.

To illustrate this, Rousseau presents Mme. de Warens as a unique figure in a corrupt age, a “soul without bitterness, which could not imagine God as vindictive and always wrathful, saw only clemency and mercy where the devout saw only

³⁰⁰ *Emile*. E 268.

³⁰¹ This argument is also consistent with the *Second Discourse*. In this case, artificial desires (encouraged by *amour-propre*) are self-destructive because they surpass both our natural needs and capacities for fulfillment.

³⁰² In this, Rousseau follows Malebranche who similarly preached the generality and simplicity of God. For a thorough study of this connection see: Riley, *The General Will Before Rousseau*.

³⁰³ *The Confessions*. CW V.192; OC I.228-229. It is worth noting that the pressure exerted by the Church was overwhelming, affecting even the noble Fénelon: “one of the astonishing things from which I cannot recover is to see the good Fénelon speak about it in his *Telemachus*, as if he truly believed it: but I hope that he was lying then; for in the end however truthful one may be, one certainly must lie sometimes when one is a Bishop.” In the *Dialogues*, Rousseau describes Fénelon as one of the few virtuous men who “did honor to modern times,” praise affirmed by *Telemachus*’ role in Emile’s education. CW I.158; OC I.863-864.

justice and punishment.”³⁰⁴ A woman of rare gentleness, de Warens’ vision of divine mercy lies in sharp contrast with the vengeful figure propagated by the Catholic Church. She hardly believed the Author of all things had endowed His creations with an irreparably sinful nature. Rousseau’s beloved *maman* found failing not in God, but in His misleading portrayal by men: “It seemed to her that Scripture was explained too literally and too harshly,” and when discussing specific articles of the Bible “it happened that she saw [each] completely differently from the Church, even while always submitting to it.”³⁰⁵ More specifically, she believed Purgatory—not eternal damnation—offered a suitable fate for the wicked, a group “always very vexing both in this world and in the other.”³⁰⁶

What begins as a passing (and seemingly innocent) plea for theological moderation immediately leads to a radical renunciation. As Rousseau hastily concludes, “one sees that the whole doctrine of original sin and redemption is destroyed by this system [of Purgatory], and the basis of vulgar Christianity is shaken by it, and that at least Catholicism cannot subsist.”³⁰⁷ The certainty of his conclusion is matched only by the suddenness of its intrusion into the text. Rousseau, it appears, is eager to remind readers that Adam’s supposed legacy of hereditary sin is a fallacy propagated by men, one debunked with as little effort as the passing mention of Purgatory. In one fell swoop, he claims a startling accomplishment: crippling Catholicism by shaking the “vulgar” foundations upon which it rests.

³⁰⁴ *The Confessions*. CW 192; OC I.229.

³⁰⁵ *The Confessions*. CW 192; OC I.229.

³⁰⁶ Given the rosy glow that often shades Rousseau’s recollections of de Warens, his account may be inaccurate. If this were the case, Rousseau would be repeating the crime imputed to him by Christophe de Beaumont of presenting impious beliefs in “chimerical voices,” a charge discussed in greater detail below.

³⁰⁷ *The Confessions*. CW 192; OC I.229.

Rousseau's antagonism towards the Church reflects what Ernst Cassirer described as a principal fear of Enlightenment philosophers, that to "change religion into mere opinion... [is to] deprive it of its real moral and political force."³⁰⁸ Unlike his *philosophe* peers, however, Rousseau shared this concern without abandoning his faith in God. More strongly, he insisted that religious associations provided a necessary moral foundation for virtuous democratic societies.³⁰⁹ Yet papal faith should not be considered genuine; it denuded religion of its ethical and practical value, supplanting divine truths with vicious myths. Nowhere was the blasphemy of their orthodoxy more evident than in the narrative of Original Sin.

* * * * *

The innocence of which Rousseau speaks is surely personal, yet its implications extend far beyond the author himself. This is evident in his self-justification: Jean-Jacques, more natural than his denatured peers, was subsequently more innocent. In ontological terms, this position assumes that humankind is good by nature and not tainted by Adam's fall. Far from it, we have corrupted ourselves, introducing evils that place us at sharp odds with our divinely-crafted natures. Rousseau's rebuke of hereditary guilt lies at the heart of *The Confessions*, just as it rests at *Emile*'s center.³¹⁰ It was also the reason he fled Paris in 1762: he escaped an arrest warrant issued by the Parlement and applauded by the Church, both of whom

³⁰⁸ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, p. 165. This claim is demonstrable in the influence of Bayle upon the *philosophe* circle, particularly Diderot (and his *Encyclopédie* article on Pyrrhonism).

³⁰⁹ See Chapter 5 below.

³¹⁰ Not only does Rousseau describe the *Profession* as *Emile*'s moral core, it appears literally halfway through the text.

viewed his renunciation of Original Sin as a threat to spiritual and political order.³¹¹ What might strike contemporary readers as a dry and distant debate was a life-changing event for Rousseau. In this, he was not alone; roughly fourteen centuries prior, the Christian ascetic Pelagius rejected hereditary guilt to equally momentous consequences.³¹²

Rousseau's indebtedness to Pelagius is typically assumed. This was true as early as 1765 when, in passing, the Abby Laurent François identified Pelagianism in Rousseau's diminution of grace as a means of salvation.³¹³ More recently, Karl Barth described the Genevan's doctrine of natural goodness as "the apogee of humanist Pelagianism," while Jean Guehenno located a Pelagian legacy within Rousseau's mistrust of metaphysics, his "sentimental" emphasis upon freedom, and the righteous tenor of his social criticism.³¹⁴ Pierre Burgelin saw shadows of Pelagius in Saint-Preux's defense of human liberty, a figure commonly assumed to be modeled after Rousseau himself. And Jean-François Thomas—in the only work devoted exclusively to this relation—concluded that Rousseau was indeed a semi-Pelagian, albeit one very much indebted to Molinism and Jesuit writings on freedom and

³¹¹ *Extrait des Registres du Parlement*, June 9, 1762. CC XI.A254.262-266.

³¹² Accused of heresy in Jerusalem in 415, newly condemned for his *De libero arbitrio* (*On Free Will*) in 416, Pelagius was finally condemned and excommunicated in 417 by Pope Innocent I, a ruling confirmed by Innocent's successor Zosimus in 418. This verdict was influenced by the verbose wrath of Augustine, who wrote volumes against Pelagius and went so far as to demand his public censure: "I do not hesitate at once to affirm that such a man [as Pelagius] ought to be removed from the public ear, and to be anathematized by every mouth." Augustine, *A Treatise Concerning Man's Perfection in Righteousness*, Chapter XXI (44) in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: Volume V*, Benjamin B. Warfield, tr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), p. 176.

³¹³ Robert Derathé, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau et le Christianisme," in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* (1948), p. 379.

³¹⁴ Jacques-François Thomas, *Le Pélagianisme de J.-J. Rousseau*. (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1956), pp. 8-9.

grace.³¹⁵ Although many have labeled Rousseau's concept of innocence Pelagian, few have explored the association in any detail.³¹⁶ Correcting this paucity allows us to both impart coherence to an oft-banded yet ill-defined term, and shed light upon the seeds from which Rousseau's most controversial theological paradox grows.³¹⁷

Before discussing parallels between Pelagius and Rousseau, we might begin with an obvious difference. Unlike the well-documented Genevan, the figure of Pelagius is marked by relative obscurity.³¹⁸ We know little of the details of his life save that he was well-educated and born some time after 350 AD, probably in Britain.³¹⁹ We also know that he was an exile of sorts. He left his birth land for reasons unknown³²⁰ and arrived in Rome *circa* 380 AD, becoming a spiritual advisor

³¹⁵ In the late sixteenth century in works such as *Concordia liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis* (*The Harmony of Free Will with Gifts of Grace*), the Jesuit theologian Molina attempted to reconcile a concept of free will with his faith in divine justice and mercy. He presented a notably optimistic view of human nature, one that allowed man sufficient grace to aspire towards redemption. For a thoughtful exposition of the Jesuit influence upon Rousseau during his stay in Montmorency see: Gilbert Py, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la Congrégation des Prêtres de l'Oratoire de Jésus," *Annales de la Société Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, Tome 38 (Geneva: A. Jullien, 1969-1971), pp. 127-153.

³¹⁶ More striking than the typical brevity with which this connection is raised are the thoughtful studies that fail to even mention Pelagius' name. Allan Bloom examines Rousseau's concept of goodness in great length. P. M. Masson's unrivaled three-volume *La Religion de J. J. Rousseau* work investigates the heretical foundations of Rousseau's theological thought. And in *The Natural Goodness of Man*, Arthur Melzer discusses Rousseau's radical renunciation of Original Sin. In all of these studies, Pelagius is conspicuously absent.

³¹⁷ I do not mean to suggest that Rousseau was steeped in (or even directly influenced by) the writings of Pelagius, but rather argue that a study of Pelagianism illuminates a problem central to Rousseau: the concomitant concern with spiritual and secular values. A figure who also expressed deep faith in heretical terms, Pelagius is far more helpful on this count than Augustine (who similarly described sin as a self-incurred disease, yet concluded that only God might cure us).

³¹⁸ "The writings of the Pelagians are notoriously anonymous," Peter Brown notes, "and so are their supporters." Much of what we know about Pelagius and his followers comes from writings assumed to be theirs, references in works of their contemporaries (most notably Augustine and Jerome), and a small number of primary sources (governmental and ecclesiastical documents). B. R. Rees attributes Pelagianism's "poor press" to this scarcity of definitive primary sources. See: Peter Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 208; and *The Letters of Pelagius and His Followers*, B. R. Rees, tr. (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1991), p. 1.

³¹⁹ See: *Pelagius's Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, Theodore de Bruyn, tr. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 10; Rees, *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic*. (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1988), pp. xii-xiv.

³²⁰ The two most common explanations are career ambitions and a spat with his father. Rees, *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

to Roman Christian aristocrats.³²¹ Pelagius entered Rome during a period of wealth and flamboyance but also insecurity and striving, one ruled by a gluttonous aristocracy both habituated to and increasingly disgusted with its routine decadence.³²² The practical consequence of such ambivalence was a demand for guidance. Nobles were “in constant need of mentors—from teachers of literature to father-confessors”—to instruct them to rise above the concupiscence so rampant amongst their socially-illustrious ranks.³²³

It was an age “clouded with doubts” not simply about the plight of the privileged, but around a core tenet of the Catholic Church: the origin and legacy of the Fall of the human soul, a subject of protracted (and indeterminate) writings, debate and dialogue.³²⁴ Before Pelagianism “there had been little open debate about matters of doctrine and belief.”³²⁵ Indeed, history suggests that the Catholic Church lacked a “coherent body of doctrine tried, tested and refined in the furnace of

³²¹ This was a popular practice amongst the wealthy and spiritually ambitious. Brown, pp. 186-188.

³²² Brown describes the privileged class of statesmen and orators as “a heterogeneous and, in part, a nondescript body of men.” Yet they could hardly be accused of dullness, baring all the exaggerated marks of ancient decadence: conspicuous consumption, lusty indiscretions, a propensity for gambling, and a distaste for scholarly work. Roman élites were also notably competitive, “determined to live according to... distinctive standards of excellence”—an aspiration guided by both “their sense of high birth” and the desire to distinguish themselves from their peers. There was also a vocal conservative backlash reared by the pagan orator Symmachus (who upheld strict protocol and ceremony in the Senate) and the Christian Senator Jerome (who no less disapprovingly beseeched his peers to “learn from me a holy arrogance”). Ibid., pp. 186-188.

³²³ In becoming a spiritual advisor, Pelagius was simply joining a well-established and increasingly popular profession. The neo-Platonist Plotinus, an influence upon the young Augustine, was one of the earliest figureheads of this tutorial tradition. Ibid., p. 188.

³²⁴ Ibid., p. 220. The free-will debates had spanned over 200 years. Augustine’s eventual victory over Pelagius was aided more by the Saint’s tireless public sermons and growing influence than unified doctrinal consensus amongst Church fathers.

³²⁵ Rees, *The Letters of Pelagius and His Followers*, p. 10. Rees goes so far as to suggest that “[t]here had been no heresy before this one, if one excludes Priscillianism which arose in the peripheral area of Spain.” One must also exclude Arianism (an early fourth century movement rejecting the divinity of Jesus Christ), as well as smaller sects such as the Manichaeans and Gnostics (from which Priscillianism is derived). It is worth noting that in his 1690 *Dictionnaire Universel*, Furetière names only three examples of heretics: Arius, Luther and Calvin; Pelagius is conspicuously absent. See: Furetière’s *Dictionnaire Universel*, Tome II.

controversy.”³²⁶ Although Pelagius and his followers claimed to be *integri Christiani* (authentic Christians), prior to his writings there existed little consensus as to what this term actually meant.³²⁷

If by the late fourth century orthodox dogma was still a work in progress,³²⁸ a definitive position had begun to coalesce around Augustine’s influential sermons on free will. According to Augustine, Scripture is unequivocal on the origins and transmission of sin: *Genesis* 3 describes the fall of man as punishment for Adam’s errant appetite; 1 *Corinthians* 15 teaches that Christ died for our sins and was raised by God as a redeemer; and *Romans* 5 describes sin as an ineradicable hereditary disease. Adam was held accountable for tasting fruit from the tree of knowledge because he was told not to (by God) and free not to (through an act of will). In falling to temptation, Adam revealed the weakness of a will whose divided nature stood in hideous contrast to the unified Divine will. Such was the legacy passed on to his species. Fatally self-subverting and the source of enduring shame, our very natures predisposed us to stray from God’s righteous example.³²⁹

At first glance, Pelagius’ teachings may seem compatible with this Augustinian (and decidedly un-Rousseauist) world-view. He urged his brethren to live a stern, disciplined life, envisioning a Christian community connected by what Peter Brown describes as an “icy puritanism,” hither unto binding ideals of propriety

³²⁶ Rees, *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³²⁷ Brown, pp. 192-3.

³²⁸ Rees, *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic*, p. 56. For a summary of the two main theories of Original Sin in the second and third centuries—what N. P. Williams describes as “Hellenic, once-born or minimizing” and “African, twice-born or maximizing”—see pp. 57-58.

³²⁹ Under this view, our only hope for redemption lay after earthly penance was paid, at the postmortem, grace of the Being whose laws we are incapable of following. For Augustine, then, the first penalty of Adam’s eternal gaffe—mortality—also provides our only hope. Because Original Man had sinned, all men must die; yet because we all lay at God’s mercy, salvation might only be attained following death.

and piousness, secular conduct aimed at spiritual elevation consummated by the grace of Christ.³³⁰ Yet Pelagius understood asceticism as redemptive corporeal vigilance rather than shameful self-denial. Far from discounting human action, he granted somatic reform a central role in the grueling struggle towards Christian elevation. Unlike Augustine, for whom salvation depended solely upon God's grace, Pelagius shifted the burden of redemption upon man's meager shoulders. Where Augustine understood human free will as the catalyst for sin, Pelagius located the means of training ourselves to live righteously. Where Augustine saw grace as the only means of transcending Adam's legacy, Pelagius identified an antidote independent of God's will. Where Augustine felt sin permeate the marrow of his soul, Pelagius saw a superficial (albeit ubiquitous) condition—bad habits reified through the ages—in need of a corporeal remedy.³³¹ Pelagius therefore presented a twofold offense to the teachings of Augustine: not only did he soften the impact of the Fall, he claimed that Christians should and could raise *themselves*.³³² Because man was not irreparably

³³⁰ Brown, p. 194. Although Rees affirms the severity of the Pelagian “evangelical, salvationist and didactic” vision (*Letters*, p. 12), not everyone agrees. De Bruyn reminds us that “[f]or most Christians, both clergy and laity, the regime advocated by zealots was too severe. Even those who approved of asceticism in general were disturbed by extreme manifestations.” He describes Pelagius as just such a moderate, citing his position on a heated dispute of Manichaean origins: whether or not Christians should eat meat. Pelagius carefully abstains from passing categorical judgment, instead claiming that scripture does not explicitly require vegetarianism of the faithful. De Bruyn overly signifies this concession, one that hardly conforms to Pelagianism's broader Christian “ascetic program” that “envisaged not the end of corporeal existence, but rather the extirpation of the passions which obscured the vision of God.” Furthermore, this isolated instance of compromise does not even distinguish Pelagius from Augustine who arrived at a similarly cautious defense of meat-eating in the *Confessions* (xxxi.45). See: De Bruyn, pp. 2-7, 12, 15; and *Pelagius' Commentary on the Romans* 14:1-23, pp. 140-144.

³³¹ Rousseau shared a skeptical view of habit. In an author's note to *Emile* he describes a vicious circle: “The appeal of habit comes from the laziness natural to man, and that laziness increases in abandoning oneself to habit.” Both he and Pelagius faced criticism for failing to explain habituated sin in light of natural goodness. See: De Bruyn, p. 24; *Emile*. E 160n.

³³² This divergence is acutely evident in their competing beliefs about baptism. Augustine preached the necessity of infant baptism as the first stage of redeeming ourselves in God's eyes. By contrast, Pelagius understood baptism as a commitment to self-conscious change, one only meaningful to mature adults. Rousseau makes a similar argument about religion in *Emile*, stressing the need

burdened with guilt, human agency in addition to divine grace could cleanse us of our sins.

In works such as the *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* and *On Nature*, Pelagius argued that sin was not a hereditary condition but a habituated lapse in judgment.³³³ Predating Rousseau's description of denatured man, he argued that corruption "lives as a guest" in humankind "as an accidental quality, not a natural one."³³⁴ Drawing upon the metaphor of an unwanted disease attacking a host-victim, Pelagius claimed that "carnal habit," far from characterizing human desire, actually "opposes the will."³³⁵ As with Rousseau, corruption distorts and disserves (rather than epitomizes) our divinely-crafted natures.

In framing this argument, Pelagius draws upon a vision of a tough-but-fair God, a figurehead who would hardly set us up to fail by establishing a standard of conduct impossible to fulfill.³³⁶ Nor would He levy eternal punishment upon creatures whom He both loved and created in His image. Rather than wait for salvation in an afterlife, we must rethink the mantra of accountability that plays so prominent a role in Augustine's narrative of the Fall. We must bear responsibility for our own actions, using Adam's model as a lesson of malfeasance rather than proof of

introduce God only after human beings are developmentally capable of comprehending Divinity ("for if he learns it sooner than he ought, he runs the risk of never knowing it"). E 257.

³³³ It is in these works that Pelagius developed what Augustine later described as the "three principal heads in the Pelagian heresy": the denial of Original Sin; the contention that "the grace of God whereby we are justified is not given freely, but according to our merits"; and the argument that "in mortal man, however holy and well doing, there is so great righteousness that even after the washing of regeneration [Baptism], until he finishes this life of his, forgiveness is not necessary to him." His influence as a spiritual leader had grown with his role as a pedagogue, but it was not until approximately 405 AD, after these works had reached Augustine's disapproving eye, that he became embroiled in controversy. See: Augustine, *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians*, Book III, Chapter 24. (Warfield, p. 414)

³³⁴ *Commentary on the Romans*, 7:17. (De Bruyn, p. 104)

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 7:18, p. 104.

³³⁶ Readers should note this parallels the position Rousseau approvingly attributes to de Warens in *The Confessions*.

irredeemable guilt. As Pelagius concludes, “I myself have provided myself with this compulsion.”³³⁷ If “I” am the agent, it follows logically that “I” must take responsibility for curing my self-incurred concupiscence.

To support his case, Pelagius distinguished between rational instinct and irrational desire. “Habitual desires, or the persuading of the enemy” is opposed to “*The law of my mind*. Namely, of natural conscience, or of the divine law, which resides in the mind.”³³⁸ In terms clearly presaging Rousseau, “divine law” is inscribed upon our “natural conscience.” Wickedness results from a failure to comprehend and follow this order, an estrangement whose redress requires the cultivation of our natural God-given ability to determine right from wrong. As Pelagius argues, we must retrain our wills, not damn our natures, because “the will was arraigned, not the nature, which God created in such a way that it [was able] not to sin.”³³⁹ Carnal impulse does not mask the stench of irredeemably tainted flesh; it rather reveals the force of habit and the prevalence of poor decision-making amongst humankind. As with Rousseau, a stifled conscience is no sign of irredeemable fault; it rather punctuates the need to reawaken this innate faculty through meaningful corporeal reform.

Augustine found in these urgings utter blasphemy.³⁴⁰ Defining corruption as habitual rather than necessary reduced sin to a problem of human “negligence,” one curable through an act of will.³⁴¹ Where Augustine saw “confirmed invalids,”

³³⁷ *Commentary on the Romans*, 7:20. (De Bruyn, p. 104)

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 7:22, p. 107.

³³⁹ *Commentary on the Romans*, 8:3, (De Bruyn, p. 107).

³⁴⁰ Augustine found this position Scripturally unsound. Citing *Psalms* 12:1 & 8; 41:4, he reminds us that the “[t]he nature of which our author [Pelagius] speaks is corrupted.” Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*, Ch. 57 (Warfield, pp. 140-141).

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Ch. 14 [XIII] (p. 125).

Pelagius envisioned humankind “like the man found wounded on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho—saved from certain death... [yet] resigned to spending a lifetime of precarious convalescence in the Inn of the Catholic Church.”³⁴² Neither might be confused with a libertine, and despite Augustine’s portrayal Pelagius was hardly an unqualified optimist. Like Rousseau, he recognized the ubiquity of societal corruption and—in a tone reminiscent of Seneca³⁴³—the difficulty of reform. Yet as with Rousseau, Pelagius looked squarely in the eyes of what he believed was a decadent culture, and challenged the *necessity* of this decline. Where Rousseau later invoked our divinely-crafted nature as evidence of inherent innocence, so did Pelagius take recourse in our intrinsic God-given goodness. Rousseau and Pelagius agreed that *men* had made a mess of a divine creation; *man* must therefore halt his self-incurred fall, reorient himself to follow his conscience with the knowledge that sin was actually the logical and finite consequence of improvident action.

Because God is the “Author” of nature (a phrase Rousseau also frequents), natural order must reflect his unquestionable goodness. Pelagius applied this logic to human nature which, as a divine creation, possessed the capacity for goodness. Yet in making the ontological claim that humankind is naturally good and not necessarily

³⁴² Brown, p. 203.

³⁴³ The Stoic sage, according to Seneca, is of so rare character that one “perhaps springs into existence, like the phoenix, only once in five hundred years.” (*Epistulae Morales* xiii.1) Sages are beings hardened to external circumstances and worldly forces who follow a moral code drawn in accordance with nature. Despite manifold difficulties, Seneca advises that the human will, can, with enough effort, achieve this plateau through personal fortification, an act of will that overcomes “weakness of the mind,” (*De Ira* II.ii.2) and an indifference to forces beyond one’s control, a state Martha C. Nussbaum labels “radical detachment” (both external resistance and internal command of one’s emotions). For a discussion of this term see: *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 363-364. On Tertullian’s reference to Seneca as “often one of us [Christians]” see: A. A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy, Second Edition*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 236. Saint Jerome also makes this connection in *Against Rufinus*. See: *Dogmatic and Polemical Works*, John N. Hritzu, tr. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1965), p. 210.

beholden to sin, Pelagius rendered an unqualified blasphemy: he negated the value of Jesus Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. As Augustine lamented, the mere *possibility* of man's innocence "renders the cross of Christ of none effect."³⁴⁴ Denying man's hereditary guilt as descendents of Adam did not merely disserve the obedience we owe God (as the only possible cause of our redemption), or brazenly raise our self-estimation; it meant that "Christ [is] dead in vain."³⁴⁵ Jesus could not have died a sacrificial death (bearing a brutal punishment for our sins) were we not all sinners. By reducing a crime of eternal guilt to one of temporal circumstance, human goodness renders the terms of his sacrifice moot.

Not that Pelagius was lenient. If eating from the tree of knowledge did not elicit eternal punishment, God's vengeance was still indisputably fierce. After all, Adam received "the death-penalty for breaking one single prohibition; and even he was less to blame than us, for he did not have the great benefit of the previous execution of a human being to deter him."³⁴⁶ To understand Pelagius' feud with Augustine as a conflict over severity is therefore inaccurate; Augustine was far more agitated by Pelagius' *emphasis*.

Let us recall the Saint's two distinct albeit related lines of criticisms: first, Pelagianism gives man an inflated sense of the value of his actions; and second, so doing demeans the role of God in our lives. If humankind is endowed with conscience, free will and a universal potential to rise above sin, this might also suggest a democratic vision of egalitarian reform. However, asceticism—a practical remedy for societal decay—posed a challenge few would except, one that conformed

³⁴⁴ Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*, Ch. 21, p. 127. See also: Ch. 9, p. 124.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., Ch. 9, p. 124.

³⁴⁶ Brown, p. 204.

to a rigid and grueling vision of the Christian life prone, much like Seneca's quest for enlightened wisdom, to failure. In the end, and unlike Rousseau, Pelagius was neither republican nor Protestant; he was simply "looking for better Christians and not for a more democratic form of government."³⁴⁷

In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau makes a strong distinction between "the Religion of man and that of the Citizen" and demands that we choose.³⁴⁸ For Pelagius, there was hardly a choice; Christians, not citizens, were his overarching concern. Furthermore, "he sincerely believed that his teaching was orthodox and consistent with that [Catholic] Church's tradition." As B. R. Rees argues, this belief guided his protracted self-defense: "it was in order to prove [his orthodoxy] to his critics that he allowed himself to become involved in an arduous and prolonged controversy for which he was by ethos and training quite unsuited."³⁴⁹ If, as Rees concludes, we should consider Pelagius a "reluctant" heretic we might also consider him a "stubborn" heretic, so certain was he of his own piety.

Whatever the qualifying adjective, Pelagius' heresy is indisputable in hindsight. He maintained theological doctrine in opposition, or held to be contrary, to the Roman Catholic Church. Yet Brown reminds us that Augustine—not Pelagius—"abandoned a great tradition of Western Christianity" by denying that "it was ever possible for a man to slough off his past; neither baptism nor the experience of conversion could break the monotonous continuity of a life that was 'one long temptation.'"³⁵⁰ By contrast, Pelagius adhered to the "the idea that conversion and

³⁴⁷ Rees, *A Reluctant Heretic*, p. 112.

³⁴⁸ *The Social Contract*. CW 219; OC III.464.

³⁴⁹ Rees, *A Reluctant Heretic*, p. 131.

³⁵⁰ Brown, p. 200.

initiation could make a total break in personality,” a belief that W. H. C. Frend describes as “the Christianity of discontinuity.”³⁵¹ In claiming that man might be reborn through an act of will, Pelagius revealed himself to be “the last, the most radical, and the most paradoxical exponent” of the ancient faith.³⁵²

And here we return to this chapter’s initial concern. Heresies are, by definition, paradoxical; they are defined by the rejection of commonly held truths. Pelagian heterodoxy offers an additional paradox—one charged to Rousseau as well—by using traditional values as the foundation of radical revisionism. Both men preached ontological innocence as a heuristic catalyst to reform; both refused to abandon core Christian doctrines including the existence of an afterlife and the moral guidance provided by God (as revealed in either the natural world or scripture); and both set redemptive doctrines against the backdrop of pessimistic realism (stark sociopolitical critique). Most significantly, both insisted upon the righteousness of their paradoxical faiths, maintaining the conviction that they were more pious than their many detractors.

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If the messages were similar, the messengers were less so. Pelagius was an austere ascetic who lived as he preached. Rousseau was neither sternly disciplined nor God-fearing, facts that did not prevent him from passing judgment. Curiously, for a thinker wedded to the idea of innocence life appeared anything but. Man may be intrinsically good but the society of his making was undoubtedly corrupting, “fit

³⁵¹ Ibid., p. 200. See also: W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (1964), p. 402.

³⁵² Ibid., p. 200.

only for making double men.”³⁵³ In evoking this image Rousseau hearkened back to Augustine, whose *Confessions* provides the *locus classicus* of divided individualism. As the Saint described, “in the process of deliberation a single soul is wavering between different wills” that pull us towards mutually exclusive loves of spiritual and carnal gratification.³⁵⁴ This morbid, painful condition “pull[s] apart the human heart” and debilitates the mind.³⁵⁵ Yet for Augustine, such was man’s lot: this internalized “struggle of myself against myself” was a manifestation of the “‘sin which dwelt in me,’ sin resulting from the punishment of a more freely chosen sin, because I was a son of Adam.”³⁵⁶

By contrast, Rousseau understood such contradictory impulses as a struggle between nature and artifice, natural instincts and social pressures, *man* (as divine creations) and *men* (as socially distorted creatures):

Swept along in contrary routes by nature and by men, forced to divide ourselves between these different impulses, we follow a composite impulse which leads us to neither one goal nor the other. Thus, in conflict and floating during the whole course of our life, we end it without having been able to put ourselves in harmony with ourselves, and without having been good either for ourselves or for others.³⁵⁷

Far from epitomizing human nature, divergent wills oppose it.³⁵⁸ In broader terms, “conflict and floating” is symptomatic of a disconnect between the way things truly

³⁵³ *Emile*. E 41.

³⁵⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII.x.23, p. 149.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, VIII.ix.21 & VIII.x.24, pp. 148 & 150.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, VIII.xi.27 & VIII.x.22, pp. 152 & 149. Augustine’s reference is to *Romans* 7: 17, 20.

³⁵⁷ *Emile*. E 41.

³⁵⁸ In works such as *The Social Contract* and *Poland*, Rousseau sought to reform society by legitimizing political institutions. Yet in *Emile* he seems far more withdrawn, suggesting we raise “a man... uniquely for himself.” Such “negative” or defensive education protects individuals from a corrupt world while cultivating their natural goodness. “To form this rare man” we must “prevent anything from being done.” (E 41) As he elaborates in his *Letter to Beaumont*, “If man is good by his nature, as I believe I have demonstrated, it follows that he remains so as long as nothing foreign to himself spoils him. And if men are wicked, as [papists] have gone to the trouble of teaching me, it follows that their wickedness comes from elsewhere. Close the entrance to vice, then, and the human

are by nature and the way they are made to seem in a denatured world. For Rousseau, this condition was a source of tremendous angst, one which he repeatedly confronts throughout his works.³⁵⁹ It was also, as Jean Starobinski believes, a preoccupation rooted in personal experience.³⁶⁰

As a youth in Bossey, Rousseau was a house servant to the Lamercier family. Alone in a room where his master's comb was found broken and "no one but myself had entered," he appeared guilty of vandalism.³⁶¹ Despite the weight of evidence and the Lamerciers' dogged interrogations, he "stubbornly persisted" in denying any wrongdoing. "I would have suffered death and I was resolved to do so," he thunders, rather than suffer the indignation of taking responsibility for a crime he had not committed.³⁶² As his vivid recollection of an incident that occurred more than fifty years prior makes plain, Rousseau was still haunted by the memory of this false accusation. It marked his conversion from naive innocent to outraged victim. In his own words, he was transformed from

a child always governed by the voice of reason, always treated with gentleness, equity, kindness; who did not even have the idea of injustice, and who suffers such a terrible one for the first time from precisely the people he loves and respects the most. What a reversal of

heart will always be good. On this principle, I established the negative education as the best or rather as the only good one. I show how all positive education, no matter how it is pursued, follows a path contrary to its goal. And I show how one tends to the same goal and how one reaches it by the route I have sketched." CW IX.35; OC IV.945.

³⁵⁹ Here I follow Starobinski, who cites "transparency" as Rousseau's primary unifying concern. This manifests itself both positively (as baring his soul in *The Confessions*, for example), and negatively—as the rejection of mediating bodies in religion (the church), politics (representative democracy), and the arts (theater).

³⁶⁰ It is worth noting that Kelly disagrees: "Contrary to what Starobinski claims, Jean-Jacques feels no split between appearance and truth. He feels a split between the Lamerciers' past gentleness and their present injustice." (Kelly, p. 94) However, these points are not mutually exclusive. The "present injustice" of denatured society, for example, also indicates a failure to act in accord with our "true" natures.

³⁶¹ *The Confessions*. CW V.16; OC I.18. For Rousseau's full account see: CW V.16-17; OC I.18-20.

³⁶² *The Confessions*. CW V.16-17; OC I.19.

ideas! what disorder of feelings! what an upheaval in his heart, in his brain, in all his little intellectual and moral being!³⁶³

Falsely impugned guilt left him with a “feeling of violence and injustice,” one that “has remained so deeply engraved on my soul, that all the ideas related to it give me back my first emotion.”³⁶⁴ An enduring source of indignation, Rousseau drew upon a general hatred from this particular experience: “my heart is inflamed at the spectacle of all unjust actions—whatever their object might be and wherever they are committed—just as if their effect fell on me.”³⁶⁵ This was a point of no return, one which evoked a bitter conclusion: “From that moment I ceased to enjoy a pure happiness, and even today I feel that the remembrance of the charms of my childhood stops there.”³⁶⁶

Under Rousseau’s adroit pen, a broken comb adopts the significance of Adam’s fall from Eden. It is an event replete with crime, accusation, punishment, breach of trust, epiphany, and a sudden and enduring loss of innocent bliss—with one crucial caveat. He insists that his Original Sin was a crime in appearance only: “Jean-Jacques appears to be guilty although in fact he is not. He appears to lie when in fact he is sincere.”³⁶⁷ His experience becomes a sacrificial testament of integrity, one where an innocent victim bears the individual burden of a general failure to determine truth from opinion. Furthermore, an error of this sort carries dire consequences.

³⁶³ *The Confessions*. CW V.17; OC I.19.

³⁶⁴ *The Confessions*. CW V.17; OC I.20.

³⁶⁵ *The Confessions*. CW V.17; OC I.20.

³⁶⁶ *The Confessions*. CW V.18; OC I.20.

³⁶⁷ Starobinski, *Transparency and Obstruction*, p. 7.

Rousseau was forced not simply from his masters' home, but from the very "serenity of my childlike life."³⁶⁸

In Edenic terms, this rude awakening forces us to consider the significance of a Fall in which man is not guilty. It was an idea first developed (in relatively impersonal terms) in the *Second Discourse* where, as with Jean-Jacques himself, humankind begins in a natural state of benign bliss and falls victim to apparently arbitrary, corrupting circumstances beyond its immediate control. As in *The Confessions*, an underlying claim of innocence appears to contradict empirical evidence. In each instance, readers must dismiss the facts Rousseau himself introduces—be it ubiquitous corruption or his sole access to a broken comb—in order to arrive at a deeper truth. Whether the subject is Jean-Jacques or humankind, readers are asked to sympathize with the innocent wronged.

Rousseau repeats this request in *Emile*, lamenting that sometimes a youth "is chastised before he is able to know his offenses or, rather, to commit any."³⁶⁹ Yet by falsely imputing malice we actually awaken it. "We fill up his young heart at the outset with the passions which later we impute to nature."³⁷⁰ This unfounded ascription epitomizes societal corruption for two reasons: it attributes intrinsic guilt to innocent creatures, and plants "the development of the artificial seeds" of *amour propre* and malicious self-interest. A child so reared grows to become a dangerous man, a "slave and tyrant, full of science and bereft of sense, frail in body and soul alike." Inept and proud, a carrier of vice, this unnatural product "becomes the basis

³⁶⁸ *The Confessions*. CW V.18; OC I.20.

³⁶⁹ *Emile*. E 48.

³⁷⁰ "After having taken efforts to make him wicked, we complain about finding him so." *Emile*. E 48.

for our deploring human misery and perversity.”³⁷¹ Such a dour conclusion is, however, misguided. “He is the man of our whims; the man of nature is differently constituted.”³⁷²

At heart of this argument is an undying faith in the ontological innocence of humankind, a connection Rousseau reinforces by suddenly directing us to his most provocative Pelagian treatise, *The Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar*.³⁷³ *The Profession* itself makes an equally conspicuous entrance into *Emile*. Neither taught to the prized pupil nor told in the tutor’s voice, it follows an introductory caveat: “I am not propounding to you the sentiment of another or my own as a rule. I am offering it to you for examination.”³⁷⁴ The “other” in question is the “decent ecclesiast,” a nameless Vicar³⁷⁵ who begins his soliloquy with a refrain suspiciously familiar to Jean-Jacques himself. “Do not expect either learned spectacles or profound reasoning from me,” he warns. “I am not a great philosopher, and I care little to be one. But I sometimes have good sense, and I always love the truth.”³⁷⁶

This humble sense of limitation immediately leads the Vicar to question his obligations as a Catholic cleric. As he admits, “it was not long before I sensed that in

³⁷¹ *Emile*. E 48.

³⁷² *Emile*. E 48. Hobbes, for one, got it wrong when he “called the wicked man a robust child.” This is somewhat misleading. As Hobbes wrote in the Preface to *De Cive*, children are pre-moral only because they are not bound by duty: “because not having the use of reason, they are totally exempt from duties. If they continue to do the same things when they are grown up and have acquired the strength to do harm, then they begin to be evil and to be called so. Thus an evil man is rather like a sturdy boy, or a man of childish mind, and evil is simply want of reason at an age when it normally accrues to men by nature governed by discipline and experience of harm.” Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, p. 11.

³⁷³ Amidst a discussion of innate moral sense, conscience, and natural love of goodness, Rousseau writes: “See hereafter the Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar.” *Emile*. E 67

³⁷⁴ *Emile*. E 260.

³⁷⁵ The Vicar is based on two *Abbés* Rousseau encountered (and admired) as a youth: “the decent M. Gaime” and “the most gentle of men,” M. Gâtier. See: *The Confessions*. CW V.76-77, 99-100; OC I.90-92, 118-119.

³⁷⁶ *Emile*. E 266.

obliging myself not to be a man I had promised more than I could keep.”³⁷⁷ His sense of imminent failure—of the unnatural demands pressed upon him—caused him to question his piety. “I was in that frame of mind of uncertainty and doubt that Descartes demands for the quest for truth.” This “disturbing and painful” state, one “hardly made to last,” compounded his misgivings of doubt itself. “How can one systematically and in good faith be a skeptic,” he asks? “I cannot understand it. These skeptic philosophers either do not exist or are the unhappiest of men.”³⁷⁸

Rousseau knew perfectly well that such philosophers did exist, and—from Pyrrho to Montaigne—were famous for their preternatural calm. But the Vicar’s sensational claim establishes his creed’s guiding principle: given the limits of human reasoning, piety cannot rest upon reason alone. As evidence he points to the “diversity of sentiments,” the variety of religious opinions whose sheer numbers subvert any one’s claim to possessing an exclusive truth.³⁷⁹ Their incongruity reveals not righteousness but “the insufficiency of the human mind” guided by excessive “pride.” “Insufficiency” prevents us from truly comprehending God, while hubris deludes us into thinking otherwise. Divine mysteries are nonetheless impenetrable:

[They] surround us on all sides; they are above the region accessible to the senses. We believe we possess intelligence for piercing thee mysteries, but all we have is imagination. Through this imaginary world each blazes a trail he believes to be good. None can know whether his leads to the goal. Nevertheless we want to penetrate everything, to know everything. The only thing we know is how to be ignorant of what we cannot know. We would rather decide at random and believe what is not than admit that none of us can see what is. We are a small part of a great whole whose limits escape us and whose Author delivers us to our mad disputes; but we are vain enough to

³⁷⁷ *Emile*. E 367.

³⁷⁸ *Emile*. E 367-368.

³⁷⁹ *Emile*. E 268. On this point, Rousseau’s influence can be seen in William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

want to decide what this whole is in itself and what we are in relation to it.³⁸⁰

Definitive knowledge of the divine is, however, nothing short of self-delusion. More specifically, such claims are both dangerous and unnecessary. Dangerous because, as the history of the Catholic church illustrates, dogmatic certainty leads to violent intolerance; and unnecessary because they do not cultivate true piety. The Vicar accepts as “true” only that which he feels “in the sincerity of my heart.” Everything else is left in a sort of spiritual purgatory, a state of “uncertainty without rejecting it or accepting it and without tormenting myself to clarify it if it leads to nothing useful for practice.”³⁸¹

Admitting not to “know why the universe exists,” he approaches it “like a man who saw a watch opened for the first time,” admiring the craftsmanship without understanding the mechanics.³⁸² He is also certain that its parts “are moving in harmony only for a common end which it is impossible for me to perceive.” But such

³⁸⁰ *Emile*. E 268. Compare this with the Vicar’s remarks on the difficulties of contemplating God (285), and the tutor’s description of God as an “incomprehensible Being who embraces everything, who gives motion to the world and forms the whole system of beings, Is neither visible to our eyes nor palpable to our hands; He escapes all our senses.” (255). This position adheres to a traditional voluntarist belief in the incomprehensibility of God, one shared by thinkers as diverse as Augustine, Ockham, Duns Scotus and Malebranche.

³⁸¹ *Emile*. E 270. The Vicar’s skepticism sets the stage for his diminution of belabored reasoning. Although conscience (our moral compass) never errs, the faculty of comparison is prone to error—it relies upon “understanding, which judges the relations, mixes its errors in with the truth of the sensations, which only reveal the objects.” (E 271) Descartes reached a similar conclusion in his *Sixth Meditation*, but understood man’s “confusion” as a consequence of his nature, “a combination of mind and body... that is bound to mislead him from time to time.” The Vicar modifies this dualism: man’s dividedness is a consequence of *denaturalization*. *Pitié* and *amour-de-soi* are the sole impulses guiding our will in the natural state, and they never lead us astray. In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau describes willing as a “purely spiritual act.” Perception and sentiment defines man’s first state, while willing, desire and fear “will be the first and almost the only operations of his soul.” (CW III.26-27; OC III.142-143.) As evidence, he offers two articles of faith. First, “a will moves the universe and animates nature.” (E 273) And second, because “moved matter” reveals a causal act of will, “matter moved according to certain laws shows me an intelligence.” (E 275) A retreat to conscience therefore offers a point of communion with God, a deference to the “intelligence” that orders the natural world. See also: Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, VI.88, p. 61.

³⁸² *Emile*. E 275.

absolute comprehension is unnecessary. Where reason requires certitude, faith is affirmed through simple observance of a divine order, one revealed “not only in the heavens which turn, not only in the star which gives us light, not only in myself, but in the ewe which grazes, in the bird which flies, in the stone which falls, in the leaf carried by the wind.”³⁸³ Such is evidence of a “supreme intelligence” neither “healthy mind” nor “unprejudiced eyes” can refute.³⁸⁴

Lest we think him an incurable romantic or a long-gone hippie, the Vicar turns his gaze to the real world. The results shock him from his starry-eyed sentimentality. “What a spectacle! Where is the order I had observed? The picture of nature had presented me with only harmony and proportion; that of mankind presents me with confusion and disorder!... Beneficent Being, what has become of your power? I see evil on earth.”³⁸⁵ As with Pelagius, the Vicar concludes that corruption is self-inflicted. “Our sorrows, our cares, and our sufferings come to us from ourselves. *Moral evil is incontestably our own work*”³⁸⁶ Of this he is certain.

Man, seek the author of evil no longer. It is yourself. No evil exists other than that which you do or suffer, and both come to you from yourself. General evil can exist only in disorder, and I see in the system of the world an unfailing order. Particular evil exists only in

³⁸³ *Emile*. E 275. Invocations such as these have led many to associate Rousseau with Deism, the belief that religious sentiment is inborn and not acquired strictly through revelation or Church teachings.

³⁸⁴ By contrast, theological “sophisms” are not simply contestable; they lead to debilitating doubt and actually make it “impossible to recognize the harmony of the beings and the admirable concurrences of each piece in the preservation of others.” (E 275) This “harmony”—the ordered expression of divine will—justifies the Vicar’s celebration of humanity: “content with the place in which God has put me, I see nothing, except for Him, that is better than my species.” As with Pelagius, evidence of man’s innocence “lies precisely in his being a peculiar, special creature of God.” Robert F. Evans, *Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals*. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1968), p. 92. For a discussion of this “new idealism” (which, along with radical skepticism and humble realism informs Rousseau’s concept of natural goodness) see: Melzer, p. 26.

³⁸⁵ *Emile*. E 278.

³⁸⁶ *Emile*. E 281. (My emphasis.)

the sentiment of the suffering being, and man did not receive this sentiment from nature: he gave it to himself.³⁸⁷

Evil is a corporeal affliction, one that exists only as a finite sentiment. Attributing its cause (and absolution) to the will of God disserves both the Author and His creation alike. To do so “is to want Him to do my work while I collect the wages for it. Not to be contented with my condition is to want no longer to be a man, it is to want something other than what is, it is to want disorder and evil.”³⁸⁸ If, as the Vicar laments, we were only “satisfied to be what we are, we would not have to lament our fate.”³⁸⁹ Rather than embrace our divinely-crafted natures we seek “imaginary well-being,” a process that “give[s] ourselves countless real ills.” An argument familiar to Rousseau’s readers, the unfettered pursuit of unnatural desires has disastrous consequences. As the Vicar makes plain, “take away our fatal progress, take away our errors and our vices, take away the work of man, and everything is good.”³⁹⁰

A return to God is clearly in order. But if, as the Vicar confides, “the more effort I make to contemplate His infinite essence, the less I can conceive it,” how might we commune?³⁹¹ Given the limits of reason we must look within. “Let us return to ourselves,” the Vicar exclaims! “Let us examine, all personal interest aside,

³⁸⁷ *Emile*. E 282. In stressing the coherence of a general divine order Rousseau again follows Malebranche.

³⁸⁸ *Emile*. E 294. Following Pelagius, because our sins are self-inflicted their remission does not require divine grace. As the Vicar makes plain, “death is the remedy for the evils you do to yourselves; nature”—and therefore God—“did not want you to suffer forever.” (E 281) Note that this both precedes and supports Rousseau’s “purgatory” argument from *The Confessions*.

³⁸⁹ *Emile*. E 281. As in *The Confessions*, the *Discourses*, and the *Letter to d’Alembert*, man’s desire to live beyond his natural limits is the source of significant woe.

³⁹⁰ *Emile*. E 282. Rousseau began *Emile* with a similar claim: “Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man.” (E 37)

³⁹¹ *Emile*. E 286.

where our inclinations lead us.”³⁹² It is this very examination that, as with Rousseau, leads him to affirm his natural goodness:

All the morality of our actions is in the judgment we ourselves make of them. If it is true that the good is good, it must be so in the depths of our hearts as it is in our works... If moral goodness is in conformity with our nature, man could be healthy of spirit or well constituted only to the extent that he is good. If it is not and man is naturally wicked, he cannot cease to be so without being corrupted, and goodness in him is only a vice contrary to nature.³⁹³

Here is a Pelagian manifesto of notable assertiveness and simplicity. Man is either good or bad. “If he were made to do harm to his kind, as a wolf is made to slaughter his prey... virtue would leave us with remorse” because it would contradict our God-given natures.³⁹⁴ But it does not. We are gratified by the happiness of others, find beneficent acts more agreeable than wicked ones, and possess “admiration for heroic actions” and “raptures of love for great souls.” Furthermore, the Vicar notes, “[a]mong so many inhuman and bizarre cults, among this prodigious diversity of morals and characters, you will find everywhere the same ideas of justice and decency, everywhere the same notions of good and bad.”³⁹⁵ Such sentiments attest to an underlying universal order, one to which all men are naturally drawn regardless of their social differences. As creatures of the same God, we are beholden to the same divine law.³⁹⁶

“If one had listened only to what God says to the heart of man,” the Vicar argues, “there would never have been more than one religion on earth.”³⁹⁷ Because a

³⁹² *Emile*. E 287.

³⁹³ *Emile*. E 287.

³⁹⁴ *Emile*. E 287.

³⁹⁵ *Emile*. E 288.

³⁹⁶ *Emile*. E 286.

³⁹⁷ *Emile*. E 295.

“just heart is the true temple of the divinity,” one accessible to “every country and every sect,” the “true duties of religion are independent of the institutions of men.”³⁹⁸ Specific forms of worship are therefore somewhat arbitrary, based upon contingencies such as birthplace and familial tradition, but not the embodiment of exclusive truths.³⁹⁹ A positive argument for religious tolerance, this also serves as a renunciation of revelation. “View the spectacle of nature; hear the inner voice,” he urges. “Has God not told everything to our eyes, to our conscience, to our judgment? What more will men tell us?”⁴⁰⁰ Not only is human testimony superfluous, it is also demeaning.

[R]evelations have only the effect of degrading God by giving Him human passions. I see that particular dogmas, far from clarifying the notions of the great Being, confuse them; that far from ennobling them, they debase them; that to the inconceivable mysteries surrounding the great Being they add absurd contradictions; that they make man proud, intolerant, and cruel; that, instead of establishing peace on earth, they bring sword and fire to it. I ask myself what good all this does, without knowing what to answer. I see in it only the crimes of men and the miseries of mankind.⁴⁰¹

As in *The Confessions*, man’s meddling only corrupts religion’s spiritual and practical value. “As soon as peoples took it into their heads to make God speak, each made Him speak in its own way and made Him say what it wanted.”⁴⁰² Reduced to a reflection of human passions and “absurd contradictions,” God becomes a puppet of those who arrogantly assume to represent him.

³⁹⁸ *Emile*. E 311.

³⁹⁹ Nature “made itself respected on earth and seemed to relegate crime, along with the guilty, to heaven.” *Emile*. E 288-289. Compare this with the Vicar’s dismissal from E 296: only “a mad vanity” could convince us “that God takes so great an interest in the form of the priest’s costume, in the order of the words he pronounces, in the gestures he makes at the altar, and in all his genuflections.” External worship “is purely a question of public policy” and civil harmony. By contrast, true piety—“that of the heart”—is nourished internally.

⁴⁰⁰ *Emile*. E 295.

⁴⁰¹ *Emile*. E 295.

⁴⁰² *Emile*. E 295.

The Vicar suggests his provocative creed should only inspire “reasons for doubt,” and demands that we “seek the truth” for ourselves. This qualification precedes a condemnation of those who, by contrast, believe “that they alone are enlightened, true, and of good faith,” and “imperiously subject us to their peremptory decisions.”⁴⁰³ It is at this point that we find Rousseau’s most revealing intrusion in his own voice, in an author’s note. He takes the Vicar’s critique as an opportunity to air his own grievances, specifically against papists. “Are the people who traffic in religion those who are religious? All the crimes committed among the clergy, as elsewhere, do not prove that religion is useless, but that very few people are religious.”⁴⁰⁴ Thus an argument for tolerance ends as an attack against the self-anointed mediators of God’s will.⁴⁰⁵

A claim of innocence that contradicts Catholic orthodoxy; a strike against the vanity of those who purport to comprehend and represent God; a defense of religious tolerance and condemnation of fanatical dogmatism.⁴⁰⁶ All this coupled with a forthright accusation against the self-proclaimed faithful who prove “that very few people are religious.” Should there be any surprise that this work was anathematized? What began as a skeptical quest to uncover simple answers to complicated questions unfolds as a renunciation of Original Sin and Catholic authority alike. Rousseau was

⁴⁰³ *Emile*. E 295, 312. For an extended discussion of this claim see: Ch. 4, “Rousseau as Recluse.”

⁴⁰⁴ *Emile*. E 313.

⁴⁰⁵ This was precisely the line of argumentation Rousseau adopted in *The Social Contract*’s discussion of Civil Religion. Readers should consult Chapter 5 below for a detailed examination.

⁴⁰⁶ However, in typically paradoxical fashion, Rousseau actually defends fanaticism as preferable to irreligion: “fanaticism, although more deadly in its immediate effects than what is today called the philosophic spirit, is much less so in its consequences.” In a tone presaging Nietzsche, Rousseau laments that “indifference to the good” born of the “philosophic spirit” is the greater of two evils, one that “quietly saps the true foundations of every society.” *Emile*. E 312.

soon held accountable for these heresies and forced, yet again, to defend his innocence.

* * * * *

Reaction to *Emile* was unprecedented. As P.-M. Masson notes, it marked the first time the publicly-sold work of a celebrated author approved by the censor Malesherbes had elicited such severe reprobation.⁴⁰⁷ Rousseau's critical attitude towards Catholicism hardly distinguished him from the *philosophes* of his age, but his writings lacked their "ordinary hypocrisies" and "irony."⁴⁰⁸ He attacked papal authority as neither an atheist nor a libertine, but a champion of genuine religious faith. The resultant scandal was so loud, the refutation so imperious, "que la justice fut obligée si sévir."⁴⁰⁹ Ruthless it was: on June 7, 1762 *Emile* was brought before the general assembly and publicly burned in Paris four days later. On June 19, the Genevan government burned both *Emile* and *The Social Contract* following the *Conclusions du Procureur général*.⁴¹⁰ And on July 18, *Emile* was banned in notably tolerant Amsterdam.⁴¹¹

In *The Confessions* Rousseau professed obliviousness to these impending storms, although his private correspondence suggests otherwise.⁴¹² He had previously expressed anxiety over *Emile*'s reception in a November 30, 1761 letter to

⁴⁰⁷ Masson, *La Religion de J. J. Rousseau*, vol. III, p. 47.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., vol. III, p. 47.

⁴⁰⁹ Masson, "La profession de foi du Vicaire Savoyard" de Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *édition critique*. (Fribourg-Paris, 1914), pp. liii-liv.

⁴¹⁰ *Conclusions du Procureur général sur deux livres intitulés de Contract Social & de l'Education*. CC XI.A266, pp. 298-301. See also: *la Condamnation*. CC.A267, pp. 301-302.

⁴¹¹ *Les Etats de Hollande et de West-Frise à la Municipalité d'Amsterdam*. CC XI.A268, pp. 302-303.

⁴¹² See: *The Confessions*. CW V.481-482; OC 575.

Malesherbes.⁴¹³ And in a May 29, 1762 letter to his publisher Michel Rey, he described *The Social Contract* as a work that would be neither “admitted nor tolerated in France.”⁴¹⁴ Reaction to his political treatise was decidedly more muted, most threatening to the Genevan Council who viewed it as a radical critique of their own government⁴¹⁵ yet greeted in France as “one of many abstract books on the philosophy of law, which, because of its obtuse nature, could not have a great influence on the public.”⁴¹⁶ *Emile*, however, received no such reprieve.

Marcel Françon described its censure as an “injustice and cruelty without equal,” arguing that the charge of blasphemy was a “pretext” obscuring the malicious machinations of “Voltaire et son clan pour perdre Rousseau.”⁴¹⁷ This was, of course, the argument Jean-Jacques presented in his autobiography. So convinced was he of both his own piety and a “Holbachian” plot against him that he reduced *Emile*’s condemnation to an elaborate personal vendetta.⁴¹⁸ Françon’s accord notwithstanding, Rousseau’s conspiracy theory is at best incomplete: it hardly acknowledges the unmistakably heretical substance of his condemned work.⁴¹⁹

⁴¹³ Quoted in Marcel Françon, “La condamnation de ‘l’*Émile*,” *Annales de la Société Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, Tome 31 (Geneva: A. Jullien, 1946-1949), p. 227.

⁴¹⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 233.

⁴¹⁵ Rousseau’s most elaborate response to the Genevan Council’s condemnation of the *Social Contract* is found in his *Letters Written From the Mountain*.

⁴¹⁶ “During the commotion caused by the *Emile* and the religious ideas that it contained,” Rosenblatt continues, “the *Social Contract* had practically been ignored in France.” Helena Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva*, p. 271.

⁴¹⁷ Françon, p. 244

⁴¹⁸ *The Confessions*. CW V.482;OC I.576.

⁴¹⁹ In its entry on *Heresy*, the 1957 edition of *A Catholic Dictionary* makes an apparent concession to Protestants: “Such Protestants as are in good faith and sincerely desirous of knowing the truth are not heretics in the formal sense, inasmuch as they do not pertinaciously reject the Church’s teaching. Their heresy is material only—their tenets are in themselves heretical, but they are not formal heretics: they do not incur the guilt of heresy.” This conclusion is indebted to Aquinas, for whom the heretic’s guilt was incurred by willfully contradicting orthodoxy: “certain doctors seem to have differed either in matters the holding of which in this or that way is of no consequence, so far as faith is concerned, or even in matters of faith, which were not as yet defined by the Church; although if anyone were obstinately to deny them after they had been defined by the authority of the universal Church, he

As we have already seen, the *Profession of Faith* renounced Original Sin, Catholic revelation and papal authority alike. Espoused by the Vicar, it nonetheless developed views Rousseau presented elsewhere in his own voice. This concordance did not escape his most vociferous critics. As the Archbishop of Paris Christophe de Beaumont commented, the use of an “assumed character who serves him as mouthpiece” was a literary sleight-of-hand, the thinly-veiled attempt of an author to distance himself from what he surely knew were inflammatory paradoxes. By renouncing Original Sin “through the organ of a chimerical character,” Rousseau was not simply blasphemous; he was also a coward.⁴²⁰

More gravely, Beaumont’s *Pastoral Letter* presents the author of *Emile* as living proof that the “*perilous days*” of Saint Paul’s predictions had come to pass.⁴²¹ An exemplar “*of corrupt spirit and perverted Faith*,” Rousseau’s disbelief took many forms: the “light, pleasant, frivolous style” of novels (such as *Julie*) aimed at stoking the imagination, seducing the mind, and corrupting the heart; the feigned “air of profundity and sublimity” in works like *The Second Discourse* that pretend “to go back to the first principles of our knowledge... in order to shake off a yoke that, according to it, dishonors humanity, even the Divinity”; “enraged” attacks “against Religion’s zeal,” and misguided defenses of “universal tolerance.” Sometimes, Beaumont concludes, disbelief unites

all these diverse languages, it mixes the serious with playfulness, pure maxims with obscenities, great truths with great errors, Faith with blasphemy; it undertakes, in a word, to harmonize light with shadows,

would be deemed a heretic.” (*Summa Theologica*, 2.2.11) Although Rousseau claimed to be in good faith, he clearly rejected Catholic orthodoxy; his heresy was therefore more than merely “material,” and indisputable even by these relatively generous standards.

⁴²⁰ *Pastoral Letter of His Grace the Archbishop of Paris*. CW IX.8.

⁴²¹ *Pastoral Letter*. CW IX.3. Beaumont’s Biblical reference is to 2 *Timothy* 3:1-4, 8.

Jesus Christ with Belial. And such is especially, My Very Dear Brethren, the object that appears to have been proposed in a recent Work, which has as its title *Emile, or on Education*.⁴²²

Emile was a perverse amalgam, a paradoxical pairing of God and Satan that paraded purity as obscenity, error as truth, heterodoxy as faith. It was also woefully impractical, proposing “a plan of education that, far from agreeing with Christianity, is not even suited to making Citizens or Men.”⁴²³ Rousseau spoke in “contradictory language,” ignored empirical evidence (“an infinite number of facts, even prior to that of Christian Revelation, that it would be absurd to doubt”),⁴²⁴ and exhibited “glaring bad faith.”⁴²⁵ He slandered the papacy (“in clouds, he cunningly imputes to us dealings that dishonor reason”),⁴²⁶ Catholics (as evidenced by the “revolting... language he puts into the mouth of a supposed Catholic,” the Vicar), and monarchs (“Kings who are the images of God”).⁴²⁷

In short, Rousseau posed a theological *and* political threat. A heretic who took “pleasure in poisoning the sources of public felicity, by inspiring maxims that tend only to produce anarchy and all the calamities that follow from it,”⁴²⁸ he undermined both Church and state. These ruling bodies were intimately linked and literally above reproach, their authority synonymous with that of Christ Himself, the “one through whom Kings reign.”⁴²⁹ Because “*there is no Power that does not come*

⁴²² *Pastoral Letter*. CW IX.3.

⁴²³ *Pastoral Letter*. CW IX.4.

⁴²⁴ *Pastoral Letter*. CW IX.9-10.

⁴²⁵ *Pastoral Letter*. CW IX.12. Beaumont repeats his charge of “bad faith” on pp. 10 & 13.

⁴²⁶ *Pastoral Letter*. CW IX.10.

⁴²⁷ *Pastoral Letter*. CW IX.13.

⁴²⁸ *Pastoral Letter*. CW IX.14.

⁴²⁹ “The constitution of Christianity, the Spirit of the Gospel, even the errors and the weakness of the human mind lead to the demonstration that the Church established by Jesus Christ is an infallible Church.” *Pastoral Letter*. CW IX.13. Beaumont’s Biblical reference is to *Proverbs* 8:15.

from God,”⁴³⁰ Beaumont argued, anyone who “*resists the Powers resists the order of God.*” As with Adam, such offenders “*draw damnation upon themselves.*”⁴³¹ Rousseau was therefore guilty on two counts. As an author, he refused to submit to this “Doctrine of a Book that cannot have been invented by men.”⁴³² And as a human being, he carried the legacy of “the deplorable fall of our first Father,” the “striking mixture of greatness and baseness, of zeal for truth and taste for error, of inclination to virtue and penchant to vice” that defines our very nature.⁴³³

According to Beaumont, only a “delicate and laborious” Christian education might uproot, “as much as possible, those vicious inclinations that are the sad effects of our hereditary corruption.”⁴³⁴ In rejecting Original Sin, Rousseau disagreed. Because corruption was self-inflicted, healing began by first *embracing* our natures; the Catholic Church actually impeded convalescence by preaching that sin was intrinsic.⁴³⁵ The Archbishop bristled at this “erroneous, impious, blasphemous, and heretical” suggestion.⁴³⁶ By renouncing orthodox precepts as unnecessary to salvation, Beaumont concluded that Jean-Jacques had sealed his own eternal fate.

⁴³⁰ *Pastoral Letter*. CW IX.14. Beaumont’s Biblical reference is to *Peter* 2:17 which teaches us to “*Fear god, respect the King.*”

⁴³¹ *Pastoral Letter*. CW IX.14. Beaumont’s Biblical reference is to *Romans* 13:1-2.

⁴³² *Pastoral Letter*. CW IX.11-12.

⁴³³ *Pastoral Letter*. CW IX.4-5. If Adam’s legacy imparts any lesson it is “*to live in this world with temperance according to justice and with piety, while waiting for the beatitude for which we hope!*” (15) Beaumont’s Biblical reference is to *Titus* 2:12-13. For Paul’s pedagogy, see also *2 Timothy* 4:1-2.

⁴³⁴ *Pastoral Letter*. CW IX.14-15.

⁴³⁵ As Beaumont warns: “Woe to you, woe to society, if your children were brought up in accordance with the principles of the Author of *Emile*! Just as there is nothing but religion that has taught us to know man, his greatness, his misery, his future destiny, it also belongs to it alone to form his reason, to perfect his morals, to procure for him a solid happiness in this life and in the other.” *Pastoral Letter*. CW IX.14.

⁴³⁶ Beaumont’s final ruling reads very much like the Parlement’s court order: “We condemn the said Book [*Emile*] as contained an abominable doctrine, suited to overturning natural Law and to destroying the foundations of the Christian Religion; establishing maxims contrary to Evangelical Morality; tending to disturb the peace of States, to stir up Subjects against the authority of their Sovereign; as containing a very great number of propositions respectively false, scandalous, full of hatred against the Church and its Ministers, departing from the respect due to Sacred Scripture and the Tradition of the

As Rousseau's response made clear, he did not take such damning lightly. His retort—the November 18, 1762 *Letter to Beaumont*—opened, provocatively enough, with a quote from Augustine: “Pardon me if I have spoken too freely—it was not to dishonor you, but to defend myself. I have relied on your seriousness and prudence, because you can measure how great [a] necessity you imposed on me of answering you.”⁴³⁷ If Rousseau felt forced to respond he did so with great verve, issuing a rebuttal more than four times the length of the *Pastoral Letter*. He began his passionate defense by recalling the facts that led to his censure:

A Genevan has a Book printed in Holland,⁴³⁸ and by degree of the Parlement of Paris this Book is burned without regard for the Sovereign whose authorization it bears. A Protestant poses objections to the Roman Church in a Protestant country, and a warrant is issued against him by the Parlement of Paris. A Republican states objections against the monarchic State in a Republic, and a warrant is issued against him by the Parlement of Paris. The Parlement of Paris must have strange ideas about its dominion and believe itself the legitimate judge of the human race.⁴³⁹

In one terse paragraph, Rousseau defends his legal rights, suggests a violation of sovereign jurisdiction,⁴⁴⁰ and attributes this abuse to an unholy alliance between

Church, erroneous, impious, blasphemous, and heretical. In consequence We very expressly forbid all people of our Diocese to read or possess said Book, under penalty of law.” *Pastoral Letter*. CW IX.16.

⁴³⁷ The lines Rousseau uses as his dedicatory epistle to the *Letter to Beaumont* are taken from Augustine's *Epistle* 238. This was the first of two letters written to Pascentius, an Arian count and tax-collector known for his vocal attacks against Catholicism and the “energetic” (read: greedy) execution of his office. Following a public debate with Augustine that he claimed to have won (although he presented little in the way of argument save personal opinion), Pascentius ignored further correspondence from Augustine. The context of this letter makes its invocation all the more inflammatory. Not only did Rousseau appropriate Beaumont's most beloved theologian, he has usurped a letter written against a heretic. Note also that the preceding line—“truth must necessarily prevail, whether we deny it or admit it”—expresses a markedly Rousseauist faith in the righteousness of truth against the delusion of opinion. *Saint Augustine: Letters, Volume V (204-270)*, Sister Wilfrid Parsons, tr. (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1956), p. 209.

⁴³⁸ This was the only version authorized by Rousseau for printing. Françon, p. 234.

⁴³⁹ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.23; OC IV.929.

⁴⁴⁰ As we will discuss in Chapter 5, this jurisdictional boundary was crucial to Rousseau's Civil Religion as well.

Church and state. He raises issues of discrimination and tolerance, legitimate authority, and the rights individuals possess in relation to unjust institutions. And he concludes that Catholic, monarchal Parisian authorities possessed neither the legal, political nor moral authority to censure a work printed with the permission of the Holland government and written by a Protestant, republican Genevan.⁴⁴¹ But they did and, as with the comb incident, the fate of the free world seemed to hinge on their ruling. “I do not know how this fits with international law, but I know very well that, with such procedures, every man’s freedom and perhaps his life is at the mercy of the first Printer.”⁴⁴²

Although the implications of this case extend far beyond Jean-Jacques himself, Rousseau cannot help but lament his own particular fate. Having taken up his pen “only for the good of my fellows,” his reward was the encroachment of bailiffs and an arrest warrant. At a time “when I hoped that my life’s troubles were about to end,” he rues, “my greatest misfortunes began.”⁴⁴³ This was not the first moment Rousseau described as his life’s worst,⁴⁴⁴ but we may here allow him his histrionics. For once, he was not exaggerating.

The censure of *Emile* indeed marked new heights of persecution, and it was due in large part to the *Profession of Faith*. Yet rather than defend this work as his own, he initially attempted to absolve himself of responsibility. Rousseau was the

⁴⁴¹ As Rousseau had written in an earlier draft, “I admit to you that it is not without surprise that I see myself summoned in some manner before you, and that I would not have understood very well on what grounds J.J. Rousseau, Citizen of Geneva, would have been accountable for his writings to a catholic Prelate.” *Letter to Beaumont* (Fragment 5). CW IX.86; OC IV.1012.

⁴⁴² *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.23; OC IV.929.

⁴⁴³ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.22; OC IV.929.

⁴⁴⁴ In addition to the comb incident, Rousseau rued his epiphany en route to Vincennes, his fame as an author, various plots hatched by his enemies, and his stay with Hume in England (to cite just a few examples).

self-proclaimed “editor” (*not* the author) of the Vicar’s sermon. In a fragment entitled *On Proceedings against Writers*, he was the hapless victim held accountable simply because “I put my name at the head of the book.”⁴⁴⁵ And in dissociative language, he argued that “one cannot... impute [the Vicar’s] sentiments to him [the editor] unless he has expressly adopted them.”⁴⁴⁶ This initial strategy seems facile, if not downright specious. After all, Rousseau never refers to himself as an “editor” in *Emile* itself; all but two of his major works bore his name; and if he did not “expressly” adopt the Vicar’s soliloquy as his own, he presents it as the thoughts of “a man more worthy than [himself].”⁴⁴⁷

Most significantly, however, Rousseau’s self-distancing collapses within the *Letter to Beaumont* itself, which on no uncertain terms reiterates the controversial core of the Vicar’s creed: man’s natural innocence. As Rousseau soon points out, this Pelagian faith unites his entire *oeuvres*:

The fundamental principle of all morality about which I have reasoned in all my Writings and developed in this last one with all the clarity of which I was capable, is that *man is a naturally good being*, loving justice and order; that there is no original perversity in the human heart, and that the first movements of nature are always right.⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁵ *On Proceedings Against Writers*. CW IX.100; OC IV.1029. Readers should note that anti-papal works were almost always published anonymously in the eighteenth century. Rousseau’s openness both underscored his courage as an author (despite Beaumont’s charge to the contrary), and suggested a tacit critique of *philosophes* such as Voltaire, Helvétius, and Holbach whose controversial writings on religion never bore their names.

⁴⁴⁶ *On Proceedings Against Writers*. CW IX.100; OC IV.1029.

⁴⁴⁷ *Emile*. E 260.

⁴⁴⁸ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.28; OC IV.935-936. (My emphasis.) As Rousseau continues: “I have shown that the only passion born with man, namely *amour de soi*, is a passion in itself indifferent to good and evil; that it becomes good or bad only by accident and depending on the circumstances in which it develops. I have shown that all the vices imputed to the human heart are not natural to it; I have stated the manner in which they are born. I have followed their genealogy, so to speak, and I have shown how, through continuous deterioration of their original goodness, men finally become what they are.” This reiterates what Rousseau makes explicit in *Emile* (E 92) and the *Second Discourse* (CW III.36-38; OC III.155-157). Note that “*amour de soi*” reflects the corrected version of the “manifestly false” original edition which read “*amour-propre*.” OC IV.1734 (936a).

His courage raised, Rousseau proceeds to interrogate his Catholic rival. “You say we are sinners because of our first father’s sin,” he continues. “But why was our first father himself a sinner?”⁴⁴⁹ At loss for a coherent explanation⁴⁵⁰ he concludes that Adam’s transgression “seems to me less a true prohibition than paternal advice. It is a warning to abstain from a pernicious fruit that brings death.” This account is “surely more consistent with the idea one should have of God’s goodness.”⁴⁵¹

Still, Rousseau is not content to merely challenge the myth of hereditary guilt.

He compounds his heresy by trivializing the gravity of Adam’s fatal choice.

There is... such a natural motive of indulgence and commiseration in the tempter’s ruse and in the woman’s seduction⁴⁵² that, considering Adam’s sin in all its circumstances, it can be found to be only the slightest of faults. Yet according to them, what a fearful punishment! It is even impossible to conceive of a more terrible one. For what other castigation could Adam have sustained for the greatest crimes⁴⁵³

⁴⁴⁹ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.30; OC IV.939.

⁴⁵⁰ This assumption is inadequate for three reasons: it follows faulty logic (“Why wouldn’t the same reason by which you explain his sin apply to his descendants without original sin?”); disserves God (to whom “we impute an injustice... by making ourselves sinners and punishable because of the vice of our birth”); and rests upon a circular argument (explaining “everything except its own principle”). By contrast, Rousseau “illuminates even the fault of the first man.” But “the only thing [Beaumont] can see is man in the hands of the Devil, while I see how he fell into them. The cause of evil, according to you, is corrupted nature, and this corruption itself is an evil whose cause had to be sought. Man was created good. We both agree on that, I believe. But you say he is wicked because he was wicked. And I show how he was wicked.” *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.30-31; OC IV.939-940.

⁴⁵¹ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.31; OC IV.940. Rousseau also makes a philological argument, noting that “as for the menace of double death, it has been shown that this term *morte morieris* does not have the emphasis they give it and is merely a Hebraic turn of phrase used in other places where this emphasis cannot apply.” Theologians, in other words, are quick to distort the message of the Old Testament. This reference is to *Genesis* 2:17 (“of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die”). For examples of the diverse usage of *morte morieris* see: *Genesis* 20:7; *Samuel* 14:44, 22:16; *2 Kings* 1:4, 6, 16; and *Ezekiel* 3:18, 33:8, 14.

⁴⁵² This view of women as “tempters” and men as helpless victims, while not inconsistent with Rousseau’s broader sentiment of victimization, is the understandable source of debate. For critiques of his stance particularly as developed in *Emile*, see: Lynda Lange, “Rousseau and Modern Feminism”; Leah Bradshaw, “Rousseau on Civic Virtue, Male Autonomy, and the Construction of the Divided Female”; Linda Zerilli, “‘Une Maîtresse Impérieuse’: Women in Rousseau’s Semiotic Republic”; and Rebecca Kukla, “The Coupling of Human Souls: Rousseau and the Problem of Gender Relations” in *Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, Lange, ed. (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).

⁴⁵³ An earlier draft of this sentence reads: “But do you consider that the more you extenuate the fault the more cruel you render the punishment, for what more terrible punishment could Adam have borne

other than being condemned to death, himself and all his race, in this world and to spend eternity in the other one consumed by the fires of hell? Is that the penalty imposed by the God of mercy on a poor wretch for letting himself be fooled?⁴⁵⁴

Adam was just a man, one “fooled” by the opposite sex. This was a vulnerability with which Rousseau clearly identified and, as *The Confessions* detail, one to which he frequently succumbed. To condemn Adam for falling to this temptation was to admit his own culpability. Yet because this weakness is instinctual, it is a desire instilled in us by God, rather than an affront to His order.⁴⁵⁵ Guilt is instead ascribed to those who bitterly damn man for simply adhering to his nature. “How I hate the disheartening doctrine of our harsh Theologians,” Rousseau decries! “If I were tempted for a moment to acknowledge it, that is when I would believe I were blaspheming.”⁴⁵⁶

But he did not. He insisted upon his piety, finally summoning the confidence to defend the *Profession* directly. We learn that the Vicar’s creed is composed of two sections. “The first part, which is the longer, the more important, the more filled with striking and new truths, is intended to combat modern materialism, to establish the existence of God and natural Religion with all the force of which the Author is capable.”⁴⁵⁷ This is the Vicar’s ode to God and rebuttal to philosophic atheism. Although the second part, “very much shorter, less regular, and less thorough, raises

for the greatest crimes...” The phrase “could Adam have borne” replaced “could God have inflicted.” *Letter to Beaumont* (Fragment 5). CW IX.89; OC IV.1016, 1758 (1016b).

⁴⁵⁴ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.31; OC IV.940.

⁴⁵⁵ As Rousseau writes in *Emile*, “Our passions are the principal instruments of our preservation. It is, therefore, an enterprise as vain as it is ridiculous to want to destroy them—it is to control nature, it is it is to reform the work of God. If God were to tell men to annihilate the passions which He gives him, God would will and not will; He would contradict himself. Never did He give this senseless order. Nothing of the kind is written in the human heart.” E 212. Compare with E 445-446.

⁴⁵⁶ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.31; OC IV.940.

⁴⁵⁷ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.75; OC IV.996.

doubts and difficulties about revelations in general,” it does so purposefully “to make each more circumspect from within his own Religion about accusing others of bad faith within theirs, and to show that the proofs of each one are not so conclusive to all eyes that those who do not see them with the same clarity as we do must be treated as guilty people.”⁴⁵⁸

The *Profession* is therefore above reproach: it pays deference to the Creator; addresses only what is “truly essential to Religion”; arrives at these powerful truths by confronting the Vicar’s “objections, his difficulties, his doubts”; is supported by appeals to both conscience and reason; teaches circumspection; and uncovers certainty only “about essential dogmas,” maintaining “a respectful skepticism about the others.”⁴⁵⁹ This was Rousseau’s recipe for cultivating true faith, a sentiment nourished in the heart, not pressed upon the will or convoluted in the mind. If these views were heretical, he maintained that they were not irreligious. Rather, he argued, Catholic orthodoxy—not the Vicar—was guilty of disserving God.

If such ideas shocked Beaumont, Rousseau insisted that they could be found in all his works. “I have written on various subjects, but always with the same principles: always the same morality, the same belief, the same maxims, and if you will the same opinions. Yet,” he laments, “contradictory judgments about my books, or rather, about the Author of my books, have been made.”⁴⁶⁰ Following the *First Discourse*, he was labeled a man of paradoxes; after his *Letter on French Music*, he became “the avowed enemy of the nation.” The *Second Discourse* changed his reputation to that of “an atheist and a misanthrope,” the *Letter to d’Alembert*

⁴⁵⁸ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.75; OC IV.996-997.

⁴⁵⁹ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.75-76; OC IV.996-997.

⁴⁶⁰ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.22; OC IV.928.

presented him as “the defender of Christian morality,” and *Julie* was considered “tender and mawkish.”⁴⁶¹ The inconsistency of his audience is clearly a point of contention:

the foolish public vacillates about me, knowing as little why it detests me as why it liked me before. As for myself, I have always remained the same: more ardent than enlightened in my quests, but sincere in everything, even against myself; simple and good, but sensitive and weak, often doing evil and always loving the good... demanding nothing of men and not wishing to depend on them, yielding no more to their prejudices than to their wills and keeping my own as free as my reason; fearing God without being afraid of hell, reasoning about Religion without libertinism, liking neither impiety nor fanaticism; but hating intolerant people even more than freethinkers.⁴⁶²

Here, then, is Rousseau as he sees himself: sincere in an insincere world; asking little and giving much; a seeker of truth loathed by dogmatists and their gullible subjects; loving God without bitterness; hating intolerance (especially when directed towards him) and artifice. An innocent man condemned, he wanted only to reveal himself to the public, “to hide my ways of thinking from no one, without pretense, without artifice in all things, telling my faults to my friends, my sentiments to all the world, and, to the public, the truths that concern it.”⁴⁶³

In the end this confession reads very much like his autobiography, and culminates in an equally confrontational conclusion. “Such are my crimes, and such are my virtues,” Jean-Jacques declares; readers are again pressed to judge. Still, he

⁴⁶¹ Rousseau adds: “Now [following *Emile*] I am impious. Soon perhaps I will be devout.” *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.22; OC IV.928.

⁴⁶² *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.22; OC IV.928-929.

⁴⁶³ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.22; OC IV.929.

seemed ill-equipped to handle a negative ruling, particularly the vilification of *Emile*.⁴⁶⁴

My *Discourse on Inequality* circulated throughout your Diocese, and you did not write a Pastoral Letter. The *New Heloise* circulated throughout your diocese and you did not write a Pastoral Letter. Yet all these Books, which you have read, since you judge them, are imbued with the same maxims. The same modes of thought are not more disguised in them. If the subject was not suited to developing them to the same extent... the Author's profession of faith is found expressed there with less reserve than that of the Savoyard Vicar.⁴⁶⁵

This is especially true of *Julie*, whose heroine's dying soliloquy reads like a condensed *Profession*.⁴⁶⁶ Yet unlike the virtuous matriarch's fictional speech (or even the speculative history of the *Second Discourse*), the Vicar's sermon stands as the moral core of a pedagogical treatise. Delivered as a lesson for its audience to absorb by no less than a Catholic cleric, this heretical teaching was not easily dismissed.

Although Rousseau claimed all his writings exposed "my sentiments in matters of Religion... as they have always been in my mouth and in my heart," he himself felt *Emile* was different.⁴⁶⁷ As he confessed to Beaumont, "I will always consider [*The Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Vicar*] the best and most useful

⁴⁶⁴ At one point he insists that Beaumont was politically motivated and would not have attacked him "if my Book had not been denounced in Parlement." *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.26; OC IV.933.

⁴⁶⁵ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.26; OC IV.933. Rousseau repeats this claim in *The Confessions*: "Everything that is bold in *The Social Contract* was previously in the *Discourse on Inequality*; everything that was bold in *Emile* was previously in *Julie*." CW V.342; OC I.407.

⁴⁶⁶ *La Nouvelle Héloïse* appeared to applause although "the profession of faith of that very Héloïse is exactly the same as that of the Savoyard Vicar." *The Confessions*. OC V.342; OC I.407. Rousseau also argued that his *Profession of Faith* was a reiteration of Julie's dying soliloquy: "In *Emile* one finds the profession of faith of a Catholic Priest, and in *Héloïse* that of a pious woman: These two Pieces are sufficiently in accord that one can explain one of them by the other." *Letters Written From the Mountain* (First Letter). CW IX.139; OC III.694. The novel itself justifies these claims. See: *Julie*, Part VI, Letter XI, esp. pp. 584-590. See also Part VI, Letter XII on Julie's "confession without shame" of her love for Saint Preux. She is innocent of this indiscretion because she upheld her duty as a wife and matriarch, even though her will could not alter her heart. CW VI.608-609; OC II.740-741.

⁴⁶⁷ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.46; OC IV.960.

Writing in the century during which I published it,” an estimation that “neither the stake nor arrest warrants” might change.⁴⁶⁸ The Vicar taught a Christian morality essential to man’s well-being, one that emphasized our natural, divinely-scribed potential (universally applicable to creations of the same God) rather than artificial sectarian difference. No matter the pressure placed upon Rousseau by papists or *philosophes*, he refused to abandon this conviction. “In ordering me to be humble, the Theologians will not make me false; and in taxing me with hypocrisy, the philosophers will not make me profess unbelief. I shall speak of my Religion, because I have one, and I shall speak of it loudly because I have the courage to do so and because it would be desirable for the good of men if it were that of the human race.”⁴⁶⁹

Attacked by atheists and Ecclesiasts alike, Rousseau maintained a belief in his own piety. As he pled to Beaumont, “Your Grace, I am Christian, and sincerely Christian, according to the doctrine of the Gospel.”⁴⁷⁰ But his faith carried a crucial caveat: “I am Christian not as a disciple of the Priests, but as a disciple of Jesus Christ.”⁴⁷¹ My Master quibbled little over dogma and insisted much on duties.” Foremost amongst these duties is brotherly love: “whoever loves God above all things

⁴⁶⁸ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.46-47; OC IV.960.

⁴⁶⁹ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.47; OC IV.960.

⁴⁷⁰ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.47; OC IV.960. Rousseau repeats and expands this claim (“I declare myself Christian”) in *Letters Written From the Mountain* (Third Letter). CW IX.168; OC III.729.

⁴⁷¹ By “Christian” Rousseau clearly means “Protestant” and not “Catholic.” As explained to Beaumont, “fortunate to be born into the most reasonable and holy Religion on earth, I remain inviolably attached to the worship of my Fathers. Like them, I take Scripture and reason for the unique rules of my belief. Like them, I challenge the authority of men and agree to submit to their formulas only to the extent I perceive their truth. Like them, I join in my heart with the true servants of Jesus Christ and the true adorers of God, to offer him the homages of his Church in the communion of the faithful.” CW IX.47; OC IV.960.

and his neighbor as himself is a true Christian.”⁴⁷² Because it “seems certain” that “man is made for society, the truest Religion is also the most social and the most humane.”⁴⁷³ Still, Rousseau admitted that empirical evidence hardly confirmed his conclusion. His peculiar faith was “subject to great difficulties from the historical account and the facts that contradict it.” Despite insisting that religion benefited society, Jews (they “began their establishment by destroying seven nations”), Christians (“all... have had wars of Religion”), and the celibate demonstrated that religious practice often disserves man’s best interests.⁴⁷⁴

Rather than discourage him, this harsh reality only affirmed his belief in the value of the Vicar’s sermon. To bridge the gap between how things are and how they should be, we must maintain faith in man’s innocence despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The Vicar provides such hope amidst despair because, like God Himself, he speaks directly to the heart independently of both mind and will.⁴⁷⁵ Unlike papal dogma, he convinces without coercion. And unlike atheism, he raises doubts, dissensions, and objections to human religion without abandoning God. This is why “every man who believes in God, of whatever religion he might be, will never read the profession of the Savoyard vicar without being moved by it.”⁴⁷⁶ No matter what others claimed, this creed offered a genuinely beneficial faith to denatured individuals desperately in need of guidance from their benevolent, omnipotent Creator.

⁴⁷² *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.47; OC IV.960. Citing Matthew 7:12 and Galatians 5:14, Rousseau reminds us that when Christ “summed up the Law and the Prophets, it was more in acts of virtue than in formulas of belief, and he told me himself and through his Apostles that the person who loves his brother has fulfilled the Law.”

⁴⁷³ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.54; OC IV.969.

⁴⁷⁴ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.54-55; OC IV.970.

⁴⁷⁵ *Julie*. CW VI.609; OC II.741.

⁴⁷⁶ *Letter to Beaumont* (Fragment 14). CW IX.98; OC IV.1026.

* * * * *

The Vicar's profession ends as it began, with a declaration of love of the truth. Its pursuit is our principal duty on earth, he concludes, one to uphold no matter the costs. "Whether they love you or hate you, whether they read or despise your writings, it does not matter; speak the truth; do the good."⁴⁷⁷ Taking this love "as my whole philosophy," he wonders where is "the philosopher who would not gladly deceive mankind for his own glory? Where is the one who in the secrecy of his heart sets himself any other goal than that of distinguishing himself?"⁴⁷⁸ By his own account, Rousseau himself. In adopting Juvenal's lines as his motto, he had dedicated his life to this very aim.⁴⁷⁹

Less well known is an earlier maxim that graced only two of his published writings. Taken from Ovid's *Tristia*, it first appears in the closing of a January 17, 1742 correspondence to François-Joseph de Conzié: "Here it is that I am a barbarian, understood by nobody."⁴⁸⁰ In this letter the quote is used quite literally: Jean-Jacques hopes the *comte* will "take his frankness in the meaning in which it is offered," not to offend but as the honest testimony of an oft-misread man "who speaks from

⁴⁷⁷ *Emile*. E 313.

⁴⁷⁸ *Emile*. E 269.

⁴⁷⁹ See: Juvenal, *The Satires*, IV.89-91. Rousseau mentions this motto in *Emile* (E 206), *Letter to d'Alembert*, the epigraph to *Letters Written From the Mountain*, and *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (Fourth Promenade).

⁴⁸⁰ Rousseau à François-Joseph de Conzié, *comte des Charmettes*, January 17, 1742. CC I.43.139. Translation from *Tristia* V.x.36 taken from Ovid, *Volume VI*, Arthur Leslie Wheeler, tr. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 249. In the letter, Rousseau adds line 37 ("the Gatae laugh stupidly at Latin words") which does not appear in the dedicatory epistles to the *First Discourse* and *Dialogues*.

experience.”⁴⁸¹ As with falsely impugned guilt Rousseau abhorred misunderstanding, particularly of his forthright *oeuvres*. Expecting that his age would identify within them “the heart of a good man,” he encountered only scorn. “The people hate me, I know it, but that is not their fault; this hatred is again the work of its tyrants; it is not me that it hates, it is what it has been told I was.”⁴⁸²

Rousseau’s paranoia is, however, misleading. The people did *not* hate him: he was acclaimed throughout Europe, *Julie* was the century’s bestselling novel, and he received an inordinate amount of fan mail from readers who felt personally touched by his passionate works.⁴⁸³ Even more striking than the inaccuracy of Rousseau’s assessment is the helplessness he attributes to his peers. They are easily manipulated by “tyrants,” cruel, “self-interested and jealous men” like the papists, philosophers and Parlement officials who used pastoral letters, stakes and warrants to “disturb and deceive.” Even as he trusted *les peuples* to read his heart, he seemed convinced of their incapacity to do so. Yet like himself they were innocent victims subject to the wicked machinations of forces beyond their control, and therefore not to blame.

Awash in discouragement, Rousseau looked for redemption in a possible future.⁴⁸⁴ One day his enemies’ “outcries will finally end and my writings will

⁴⁸¹ CC I.43.139. When Ovid’s quote appears again (as the dedicatory epistle of the *First Discourse*), it raises a striking paradox: Rousseau initiated his literary career by attacking the arts, and used as his dedication the words of a misunderstood poet. Puffendorf also quotes the same verse in his *Right of Nature and of Nations* (IV.I.vi) when discussing the origin of languages.

⁴⁸² *Letter to Beaumont* (Fragment 12). CW IX.94; OC IV.1021-1022.

⁴⁸³ See: Darnton, “Readers Respond to Rousseau: The Fabrication of Romantic Sensitivity”; *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*.

⁴⁸⁴ “One day perhaps what is the shame of my century will be its glory, and those who will read my book [*Emile*] will say with admiration: How angelic those times must have been in which a book like that was regarded as impious, doubtless then all writings breathed the most sublime devoutness and the earth was covered with nothing but saints.” *Letter to Beaumont* (Fragment 14). CW IX.98; OC IV.1026. Dripping with sarcasm, this claim prepares us for the opening to *The Confessions* in which Rousseau suggests to his audience that they were certainly no better than he. Note that in the final

remain to [their] shame.” Only then would he be avenged by “less prejudiced Christians” who might recognize the concord, charity, and “morality of their divine master” imbued in his ideas.⁴⁸⁵ In so casting his gaze, Rousseau looked as he often did, in different directions—towards a better future while dwelling on a disappointing past. Possible redemption offered some solace, and he was willing to sacrifice his present happiness to serve a higher good.⁴⁸⁶ This sense of martyrdom placed him in the shadows of Jesus and Socrates. “They crucified my master and gave hemlock to a man who was worth more than I,” Rousseau confides.⁴⁸⁷ If he was not their equal he nonetheless felt their burden. Preaching truths to a vengeful, intolerant society, he assumed history would treat his paradoxes as kindly as it did those of his forebears. Only then would “the glory to which I laid claim” be recognized.⁴⁸⁸

If such faith seems irreconcilable with his acute doubt, we must remember that Rousseau never conflated natural goodness with incorruptibility. Far from it, the Vicar notes, “the fact that I act in good faith does not mean I believe myself infallible.”⁴⁸⁹ Nor did Jean-Jacques. As his own testimony proves, he was a man of many flaws, one who (despite insistence otherwise) occasionally acted in bad faith. He simply did not take his errancy as proof of irredeemable guilt. Rather, to

printed version, he removes an explicit mention of the Vicar’s faith. Compare with: *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.60; OC IV.984-985.

⁴⁸⁵ *Letter to Beaumont* (Fragment 12). CW IX.94; OC IV.1021.

⁴⁸⁶ “I said to myself, oh what good would be done for men by the one who would tell them the truth without disguise, without fear, without satire and without flattery, the one who, uprooting their base prejudices, would dry up the source of their miseries, the one who would make them see that they are wicked only because they are dupes, and unhappy only because they are foolish, the one who would teach them that they are made to be happy and good and what they have to do to be so... I have tried to be that man; at least I dared to be him, and what is most difficult in this enterprise is courage.” *Letter to Beaumont* (Fragment 10). CW IX.91-92; OC IV.1018-1019.

⁴⁸⁷ *Letter to Beaumont* (Fragment 5). CW IX.89; OC IV.1016.

⁴⁸⁸ Rousseau describes this “glory” as “a sincere desire to be useful and true, disinterestedness, and good faith.” His faith is evidenced by both his dedication to public welfare and his non-partisanship. *Letter to Beaumont* (Fragment 10). CW IX.92; OC IV.1019.

⁴⁸⁹ *Emile*. E 294.

Rousseau and society alike, lapses merely reiterated the need for positive guidance. “As I justly distrust myself,” the Vicar divulges, “the only thing that I ask of [God], or rather that I expect of His justice, is to correct my error if I am led astray and if this error is dangerous to me.” Yet if the strength to stay a steady course fails, “of what can I be guilty? It is up to the truth to come nearer.”⁴⁹⁰

This, finally, was Rousseau’s objective: to bring the truth nearer. This is what drove him to explain how we had fallen from our natural state; how everything degenerates in human hands; why man was/is⁴⁹¹ born free, yet everywhere in chains; why divine guidance was both accessible and necessary; where society erred, and how individuals might still be redeemed by rekindling the divine sentiment within us. Yet how can we be both free and in chains? Inherently good and authors of sin? Deeply innocent yet demonstrably guilty? Ruled by dogmatists if God’s order is so evident and compelling? Paradoxes such as these have beguiled readers for more than two hundred years; are they only now resolvable, much less pardonable?

If we approach Rousseau’s paradoxes not as contradictions demanding definitive resolutions, but as antinomies intrinsic to the human condition, they might yet serve a practical purpose: stoking our courage and desire to change a world itself characterized by vicious contradictions, without letting us lapse into cynical apathy. After all, Rousseau himself believed that his combined expression of acute discomfort and unbounded faith was a necessary catalyst for reform. Still, we need not rush to judgment. Before assessing the coherence and practical utility of his dissonant vision,

⁴⁹⁰ *Emile*. E 294.

⁴⁹¹ The original sentence—“L’homme est né libre, et partout il est dans les fers”—is ambiguous. In French, it can refer to both a past and present condition: man either “was” or “is” born free. *The Social Contract*. OC III.351. For a discussion of the implications of each translation see CW IV.xiii.

we might first turn to another theme that illustrates the confluence of religious and secular traditions so crucial to his work: reclusiveness.

Chapter 4: The Reluctant Recluse

A truly happy being is a solitary being. God alone enjoys an absolute happiness. But who among us has the idea of it?

—Rousseau, *Emile*⁴⁹²

Il n' y a que le méchant qui soit seul.

—Diderot, *Le fils naturel*, Act IV, Scene III.⁴⁹³

As with innocence, reclusiveness is a theme prominent within Rousseau's life and works, and one that illustrates his peculiar incorporation of Christian and Pagan traditions.⁴⁹⁴ In praising solitude, Rousseau (in)famously distanced himself from his peers, stressing his uniqueness while levying stark critiques upon the society of his contemporaries' making. He championed the virtues of Geneva as an expatriate in France, and waxed eloquent on mankind's natural state of ignorant, innocent isolation. What began as a largely theoretical enterprise—a public figure's praise of isolation and withdrawal—took a highly politicized turn towards the literal. Following the publication of his most controversial work—*Emile*, and its chapter *The Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Vicar*—Rousseau was exiled, forced into the very seclusion he had for so long argued was an antidote to corrupting social relations.

⁴⁹² *Emile*. E 221.

⁴⁹³ "Only the wicked are alone." Diderot, *Œuvres*, Tome IV, p. 1113.

⁴⁹⁴ The etymology of the word "recluse" confirms its religious overtones. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "recluse" refers to persons "secluded from society, especially as a religious discipline." A recluse can describe either "[a] person shut up from the world for the purpose of religious meditation" (such as monks or hermits), or someone "who lives a retired life, one who mixes little with society."

If Rousseau is far more religious than is commonly held, his religiosity is nonetheless qualified by a concurrent commitment to temporal aims and secular values. This phenomenon is particularly evident in his appropriation of Christian and Pagan models of withdrawal. To support this claim, I will examine Rousseau's evolution as a recluse from the demonstrative self-distancing of his early career, to a more mature incorporation of isolation into a model of civic education, to his final, literal retreat from Montmorency following the censure of *Emile* and *The Social Contract*.

Despite its many guises, the theme of reclusiveness remained central to Rousseau's thought. He was, in practice if not by design,⁴⁹⁵ a consummate outsider. This applies in three senses of the word. First, *figuratively*, as "[o]ne who is outside any enclosure, barrier, or boundary."⁴⁹⁶ Second, *practically*, as "[a] person who is isolated from or does not 'fit' into conventional society either through choice or on account of some social, intellectual, etc., reason."⁴⁹⁷ And third, *literally*, as "[o]ne whose position is on the outside of some group or series," "a non-member."⁴⁹⁸

Throughout his works, Rousseau reminds us that he was "not made like any [other] that exist."⁴⁹⁹ A "natural" individual in a denatured society, an honest author at odds with his vain philosophical peers, and a truly pious believer deeply critical of

⁴⁹⁵ The self-consciousness with which Rousseau pursued his highly unfashionable claim to the truth supports the argument that his solitude was in fact calculated from the outset. Numerous examples in his early writings stress the fact that he understood and accepted the alienating consequences of his political philosophy. At the same time, Rousseau can be read as a highly unaccountable author, a phenomenon discussed at great length by Jean Starobinski as evidence of his passivity and propensity towards personal deflection. In this sense, Rousseau's solitude may be read as the consequence of forces beyond his control, a description particularly suited to his discussion of his flight from Montmorency in *The Confessions*.

⁴⁹⁶ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Sense 1A.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, Sense 1C.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, Sense 2 and 1A.

⁴⁹⁹ *The Confessions*. CW V.5; OC I.5.

the Catholic church, these distinctions established his unabashed uniqueness. He was also a man of unbounded temperament: the force of his writings, the frequency of his fractured relationships, and his willingness to adopt unfashionable stances—to attack, for example, both atheists and papists alike—testify to this fierce independence.

Rousseau's resistance to assimilate was the result of choices made, but ones over which he professes to have had very little control.⁵⁰⁰ The reasons were in part social. He was born to a petty *bourgeois* family and identified himself with the common man; he abhorred the vacuous privileges of the upper class and the hierarchy of European social castes; he abandoned fashionable garb for Cossack robes, and stressed his inability to master social conventions;⁵⁰¹ and he repeatedly subverted any chances he had in securing a life of upward mobility.⁵⁰² In defying convention, Rousseau challenged boundaries both formally and substantively, using opera, novels, letters, plays, prose and dialogues as vehicles for his sharp social commentary.

The Genevan was particularly an outsider in his religious thought. Convinced of his piety yet charged with heresy, he condemned Church and academy alike for furthering their own particular aims at the expense of the general good. Catholic

⁵⁰⁰ Starobinski interprets Rousseau's passivity as a justification for his lack of control. As he writes in *Transparency and Obstruction*, "Rousseau almost always prefers to avoid action and effort." See: *Transparency and Obstruction*, p. 91.

⁵⁰¹ Rousseau also claimed to have practical reasons for wearing robes: they purportedly alleviated the pains of his well-publicized urinary tract disorder.

⁵⁰² To this point, consider Rousseau's following recollection: "I renounced forever every project of fortune and advancement. Determined to pass the little time I had left to live in independence and poverty, I applied all the strength of my soul to breaking the irons of opinion, and to doing courageously everything that appeared good to me, without bothering myself in any way about the judgment of men." *The Confessions*. CW V.303-304; OC I.362. Rousseau offers numerous additional examples, including his frequent (and abrupt) career changes, his failure to meet the King of France one day after *Le Devin du Village* premiered, and his dispute with Hume and subsequent rejection of King George III's offer of an annual pension.

leaders labeled him a dangerous heretic,⁵⁰³ while his attack on the arts and sciences prompted Voltaire to wonder, “What about Jean-Jacques’ book against the theater? Has he become a priest of the Church?”⁵⁰⁴ It is no mean feat to simultaneously alienate atheists and papists; but for Rousseau, *solitaire extraordinaire*, such estrangement exemplifies the isolating effects of his thought.

Taken within the context of his broader political project, we may understand Rousseau’s aggressive self-distancing as the means to a coherent end: society’s redemption, an aspiration at times facilitated by active withdrawal. Yet even if we allow him the consistency he claimed was a hallmark of his entire *oeuvres*,⁵⁰⁵ how might we make sense of the apparent contradictions at play? An outsider so deeply involved with the in-crowd, so insistently proud of a nation to which he never returned (and eventually renounced),⁵⁰⁶ so scornful of the public eye his writings resoundingly drew, Rousseau was a man of conundrums if not outright contradictions.

A natural individual caught in the perverse machinations of a denatured world, he sought recourse in solitude. But what, specifically, did his praise of withdrawal suggest? Was it the wicked rumination of a misguided misanthrope, as Diderot implied? The embrace of a ‘horrible’ life opposed to society, as described in the

⁵⁰³ The Archbishop Christophe de Beaumont condemned *Emile* (and, by implication, its author) as “containing an abominable doctrine, suited to overturning natural Law and to destroying the foundations of the Christian Religion... tending to disturb the peace of States, to stir up Subjects against the authority of their Sovereign,” in short, a “scandalous” work, “erroneous, impious, blasphemous, and heretical.” *Pastoral Letter of his Grace the Archbishop of Paris*. CW IX.16.

⁵⁰⁴ Besterman XIX.D7864. See also: Cranston, *The Noble Savage*, p. 137.

⁵⁰⁵ Rousseau begins his religious self-defense in the *Letter to Beaumont* by stressing his consistency: “I have written on various subjects, but always with the same maxims, and if you will the same opinions.” This is an oft-repeated claim of Rousseau’s, specifically evoked to defend himself from the increasing controversy his works generated. See: *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.22; OC IV.928.

⁵⁰⁶ Rousseau renounced his Genevan citizenship on May 12, 1763.

Encyclopédie?⁵⁰⁷ The retreat of a religious individual unconcerned with earthly affairs? Or the compelling reaction of a good man caught in a less-than-virtuous society?⁵⁰⁸ What forms did it take, and what does this reveal about the broader tension in his works between spiritual and secular salvation, heuristic idealism and pessimistic realism? How does a study of this theme illuminate our understanding of Rousseau generally, and his secular appropriation of Christian themes specifically? Is his model of reclusiveness compatible with his dream of democratic virtue, or does it merely punctuate the incoherence of his enterprise?

The road to these answers winds through three stages and three different senses of retreat. Before treading down this path, let us begin from the beginning, not of Jean-Jacques' life, but of his career.

* * * * *

Rousseau was a recluse. To anyone familiar with the author, this point should hardly seem contentious. According to his *Confessions*, even the most perfunctory of social obligations left him deeply disconcerted.⁵⁰⁹ A sensitive soul whose life's work

⁵⁰⁷ In his entry, Jaucourt condemns solitude as an *horreur* (even, notably, for the Christian) and “[un] état opposé à celui de la société.” The solitary man is no less spared: “Cet état est celui où l'on conçoit que se trouveroit l'homme s'il vivoit absolument seul abandonné à lui-même, & destitué de tout commerce avec ses semblables. Un tel homme seroit sans doute bien misérable, & se trouveroit sans cesse exposé par sa foiblesse & son ignorance à périr de faim, de froid, ou par les dents de quelque bête féroce. L'état de société pourvoit à ses besoins, & lui procure la sûreté, la nourriture & les douceurs de la vie.” Diderot, *Encyclopédie*, Tome XV, p. 325.

⁵⁰⁸ In his introduction to the English translation of *The Confessions*, Christopher Kelly distinguishes between “goodness” and “virtue” in Rousseau's works: “Goodness allows one to follow one's inclinations without (usually) harming anyone else. Virtue allows one to overcome one's inclinations on those occasions when they would lead to harming someone else. While goodness is a natural quality, virtue is a moral quality made necessary by the complexity of social life.” This distinction helps reconcile the tension posed by Rousseau's formulation that man is naturally good although society lacks virtue. For Kelly's full discussion see: CW V.xxiii-xxiv.

⁵⁰⁹ According to Rousseau, his social skills were subverted by “slowness in thinking joined with... liveliness in feeling,” a condition that afflicted him both alone and in company. “So little master of my

thrust him into the public spotlight, the added attention caused him significant woe. In the 1763 preface to his *First Discourse*, Rousseau disparaged his “celebrity” as “an abyss of miseries.”⁵¹⁰ Truth be told, not everyone has the stomach for such a life (as his remorse makes painfully clear). But Rousseau’s “miseries” reflect much deeper concerns. By the *Second Discourse* we learn that social attachments opened Pandora’s box. Mankind—innocent, ignorant and content in the state of nature—was corrupted, subjugated by the inegalitarian relations borne of civil society. Rousseau—innocent,⁵¹¹ learned, profoundly malcontent—took this perverse development to heart.

His critique of inequality took sweeping aim at social relations, and drew resounding protest from those threatened by his assessments of private property and contemporary society alike. Yet he continued to speak his mind, no matter the consequences. Rousseau was well aware of the alienating effect his ideas had; the enmity of his contemporaries was simply not enough to deter him. “I foresee that I will not easily be forgiven for the side I have dared to take,” he admits. “Running counter to everything that men admire today, I can expect only universal blame.”⁵¹² But unlike Crispus, who appeased the tyrant Domitian with tactful silence, Rousseau vowed to do what the Roman courtesan had not: “freely state his opinions and risk his

mind when I am all by myself, one can judge what I must be in conversation, where, in order to speak to the point one must think about a thousand things simultaneously and on the spot. The mere idea of so many social conventions, at least one of which I am certain to forget, is enough to intimidate me. I do not understand how one even dares to speak in a social circle.” *The Confessions*. CW V.95-96; OC I.113-115.

⁵¹⁰ This comes from a Forward to the revised Preface, written approximately thirteen years after the *First Discourse* was first published. *First Discourse*(1763 Forward). CW II.3; OC I.1237.

⁵¹¹ I am referring to Rousseau’s triple claim of innocence: *natural* (the Pelagian heresy at the heart of the *Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Vicar*); *juridical* (in the charges levied against *Emile* and *The Social Contract*); and *personal* (an individual who is good of heart and attuned to his natural innocence).

⁵¹² 1763 Preface to the *First Discourse*. CW II.3; OC III.3.

life for the truth.”⁵¹³ Taking these words as his motto, Rousseau drew a line between himself and his entire age, particularly “the Witty or the Fashionable”⁵¹⁴ *philosophes* who wrote with smug self-satisfaction, and papists whose dogmatism dictated the terms of individual material worship.

Rousseau was no stranger to contrariness. Yet in typically paradoxical fashion, he decried its frequency amongst philosophers as a form of sophistry, a vain method of self-promotion used to garner recognition. Academics favored personal accolades above the public good, and cherished individual success more than genuine virtue. As Rousseau clarified in his 1753 *Preface to Narcisse*, the “taste for letters... is born from the desire to distinguish oneself.”⁵¹⁵ This desire “necessarily produces ills that are infinitely more dangerous than all the good that they do is useful,” and “makes those who surrender to it very unscrupulous about means for succeeding.”⁵¹⁶ The philosopher’s quest is painted in terms reminiscent of the Bible’s Edenic lesson: the fruits of knowledge may be tempting, but their acquisition precipitates a morally crippling sacrifice. In the zeal to acquire individual enlightenment, to distinguish themselves from their peers, philosophers succumb to self-interest while shirking their duties as citizens.

Although Rousseau does not categorically dismiss philosophical speculation, he wags a stiff finger at those who pursue wisdom under false pretenses and seek recognition at any cost. In one frenzied stroke, and along these lines, he castigates

⁵¹³ Juvenal, *The Satires*, p. 28.

⁵¹⁴ Rousseau strikes a grandiose concern for posterity: “One must not write for such Readers when one wants to live beyond one’s century.” 1763 *Preface to the First Discourse*. CW II.3; OC III.3.

⁵¹⁵ *Preface to Narcisse*. CW II.191; OC II.965.

⁵¹⁶ *Preface to Narcisse*. CW II.191; OC II.965.

two thousand years of Western political thought from ancient Greece to the Middle Ages:

The first Philosophers made a great reputation for themselves by teaching men the practice of their duties and the principles of virtue. But soon these precepts having become common, it was necessary to distinguish oneself by opening up contrary routes. Such is the origin of the absurd systems of Leucippus, Diogenes, Pyrrho, Protagoras, Lucretius. Hobbes, Mandeville and a thousand others have pretended to distinguish themselves among us; and their dangerous doctrine has borne such fruit, that although we still have some Philosophers ardent to recall the laws of humanity and virtue to our hearts, one is surprised to see to what point our reasoning century has pushed disdain for the duties of man and of citizen to its maxims.⁵¹⁷

Those who seek “to recall the laws of humanity and virtue to our hearts” form a lonely minority. Most philosophers are, by contrast, charged with grave negligence, vain ambition, and the correlative “fruit” of self-glorification. In attempting to further their reputations, they privilege spectacle above substance or utility. And from a moral standpoint, they neglect their most truly noble service: namely, the “duties of man and of citizen,” subsumed under the satiation of self-interest. As Rousseau elaborates, “[t]he taste for letters, philosophy and the fine arts destroys love of our primary duties and of genuine glory. Once talents have seized the honors due to virtue, everyone wishes to be an agreeable man and no one concerns himself with being a good man.”⁵¹⁸

The harsh certainty of Jean-Jacques’ judgment soon proved ironic. Two years later, fellow Genevan Charles Bonnet levied precisely the same charge against *him* attacking the *Second Discourse* as the paradoxical work of a self-promoting rabble-

⁵¹⁷ *Preface to Narcisse*. CW II.191; OC II.965-966.

⁵¹⁸ *Preface to Narcisse*. CW II.191; OC II.966.

rouser.⁵¹⁹ This followed Diderot's claim (echoed by Voltaire) that the *First Discourse* represented a deliberate change of heart, a position on the arts and sciences calculated to garner its author attention and notoriety. Infuriated by the insinuation, Rousseau rose to his own defense.⁵²⁰ Certain that his work served society's best interests, he defended himself by stressing his own uniqueness. Unlike his more decorated peers, he was both capable of recognizing the "absurdity" of their maxims, and bold enough to challenge them.⁵²¹ The singularity of his vision was matched only by his dedication to revealing the truth, qualities that distinguished him as a champion of society's salvation.⁵²² It was this unique combination of clarity and courage in the face of overwhelming pressure that set him apart. Far from serving his own self-interest, Rousseau was the sole author of his age who dared to challenge the mighty empires of both *philosophe* and Papal dogma.⁵²³

Compelled to respond against the very charges he had levied upon philosophers in his *First Discourse*, Rousseau's defense came at a price: it further isolated him. Having taken society to task, he was forced to emphasize his role as a recluse amongst philosophers, the sole intellectual who stood apart—and alone—on

⁵¹⁹ See: *Letter from M. Philopolis*. CW III.123-126; OC III.1383-1386.

⁵²⁰ Although James Miller downplays Rousseau's efforts to rebuke Voltaire's barbs, Rousseau's correspondence suggests that he responded passionately on numerous occasions. See *Rousseau: Dreamer of Democracy*, p. 53.

⁵²¹ As Rousseau replies, "Let us suppose that a singular mind (*esprit*), bizarre, and in fact a man of paradoxes, then dared to reproach others for the absurdity of their maxims, to prove to them that they run to death in seeking tranquility, that by dint of being reasonable they do nothing but ramble." *Letter from J.-J. Rousseau to M. Philopolis*. OC.III.231; CW III.127. It is also worth noting that Bonnet's pseudonym, "Mr. City-lover," was certainly conceived in antagonism towards Rousseau.

⁵²² Rousseau's sense of his own uniqueness is, in this respect, greatly exaggerated. There were, of course, dozens of other entries for the prize of Dijon that likewise attacked the arts and sciences as a corrupt influence upon society. For a further discussion of this theme see: P-M Masson, *La religion de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, Vol. I, pp. 259-261.

⁵²³ For Rousseau, Church and academy were birds of a feather: "The two parties attack each other reciprocally with so many sophisms," yet neither fosters virtue, goodness or meaningful enlightenment *Emile*. E 312n.

behalf of all. The condemnation he had foreseen as a consequence of his contrariness was materializing. In claiming his innocence, he merely drove a deeper wedge between himself and his culpable age. Attacking ideas and occupations his powerful counterparts held dear, he was forced to retreat from their ranks. His praise of solitude, coupled with a condemnation of society, placed him in a lonely corner indeed.

A philosopher who attacked philosophers, a storied member of the Enlightenment who was also one of its most vociferous critics,⁵²⁴ Rousseau pulled few punches. If vainglory was a capital offense, masquerading private interests as public goods was a cardinal sin. Philosophers, that “troop of charlatans, each crying from his own spot on a public square: Come to me, I alone do not deceive,” were doubly guilty.⁵²⁵ Like Christian clerics, they presented their ideas as gospel, coercing men to bow under the authority of their vacuous reasoning. “Under the haughty pretext that they alone are enlightened, true, and of good faith,” Rousseau’s Vicar chides, “they imperiously subject us to their peremptory decisions and claim to give us as the true principles of things the unintelligible systems they have built in their imagination.”⁵²⁶ Like Catholic clerics, philosophers abuse the privileges of their self-anointed grace, parading elaborate, incoherent opinion as irrefutable truth. And in so doing, they demand subservience to hollow ideals unfulfilled in practice, a

⁵²⁴ Darrin M. McMahon describes Rousseau’s influence on anti-*philosophes* who “borrowed from him extensively, citing Rousseau’s passages against their common enemies; sharing his dissatisfaction with the corruption of the age; and echoing his belief that sentiment, emotion, and feeling were wellsprings of faith.” See: McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 35.

⁵²⁵ *First Discourse*. CW II.20; OC III.27.

⁵²⁶ *Emile*. E 312.

phenomenon exemplifying society's most perverse pressure: the denaturing rule of *doxa*.

By contrast, Rousseau presented himself to the public as a good, honest soul attuned to their best interests. Yet he challenged the motives of philosophers while producing an enormous body of philosophical literature; he attacked their ersatz claims to supposed truths while dedicating his life to that very pursuit. What, then, made Rousseau any different? Why were his works alone free of the self-interested sophistry so rampant amongst his much-maligned peers?

For one, Jean-Jacques took shelter in his self-proclaimed commonness. In the penultimate paragraph of his *First Discourse*, he addressed average readers as one of their ranks: "As for us, common men not endowed by Heaven with such great talents and not destined for so much glory, let us remain in our obscurity. Let us not chase after a reputation which would escape us, and which in the present state of things would never be worth what it cost, even if we had all the qualifications to obtain it."⁵²⁷ Rousseau was not entirely without cause in siding with the common man. After all, his origins were humble: the son of a Genevan watch-maker, a largely self-taught runaway who toiled through various ignoble positions on a circuitous and surprising path to fame. Yet what most set Rousseau apart from his fellow *philosophes* was the very insistence with which he set himself apart. He cultivated his commonness as an antidote to their erudition,⁵²⁸ stressing his solidarity with a

⁵²⁷ *First Discourse*. CW II.22; OC III.30. It is worth noting the language of Rousseau's phrase: "As for us, common men..." Bear in mind that this essay was written for the Academy at Dijon—and certainly *not* the so-called "*hommes vulgaires*" with whom Rousseau identifies and purportedly addresses.

⁵²⁸ Despite Rousseau's charge, he was a notably erudite and voraciously self-educated figure. What separates him from other "philosophers" was not his degree of learnedness, but rather his application of scholarly knowledge to practical problems such as civic duty and religious reform.

general populace endowed with neither the means nor the motive to distinguish themselves. Insistent upon his uniqueness, Rousseau took refuge in his affinity for the average.

At this beginning stage in his career, he had not yet achieved the fame and recognition that he would almost immediately rue. As such, it would be premature to simply dismiss him as a blind hypocrite. Yet the very fact that his career in letters began with a renunciation of a career in letters, that his arrival into the *philosophe* circle was coupled with a hyperbolic criticism of philosophy, that he established his uniqueness by praising his commonness, attests to a curious methodology. Had Rousseau been a recluse in the strictest sense of the word, he would have kept quiet (or, at the very least, less visible). Instead, he raised his voice to a fevered pitch and in so doing invited scrutiny upon himself. Why would someone so philosophically gifted subvert the very enterprise he had chosen to undertake? Why would an author of operas and plays criticize the arts and sciences? Why would Rousseau attack contrariness and self-promotion while trumpeting his own honesty, utility and forthrightness in decidedly contrary prose?

His simultaneous isolation and involvement sounded the demonstrative outcry of a social reformer. If Rousseau was sincere in his praise of solitude, so was he equally concerned with civic welfare: the society in which he felt entirely ill at ease was desperately in need of salvation. Although his acute discomfort certainly informed his recourse to retreat, in taking seriously his duty as a citizen he could not in good faith (nor in good conscience) abandon his fellow men. For the Rousseau of

these early years, his reclusiveness was *necessarily* demonstrative: he was far too concerned to completely absolve himself, and far too critical to assimilate.

Alone amongst philosophers, his solitary role as champion of *les peuples* served a distinct pedagogical purpose: to demonstrate the folly of his hubristic peers while reminding us of the true path to a more natural, virtuous existence. As he rhapsodizes in the *First Discourse*'s final paragraph, "O virtue! Sublime science of simple souls, are so many difficulties and preparations needed to know you? Are not your principles engraved in all hearts, and is it not enough in order to learn your Laws to return into oneself and listen to the voice of one's conscience in the silence of the passions?"⁵²⁹ The retreat is three-fold. In claiming that true virtue—that "sublime science"—is engraved in our hearts and revealed through conscience, Rousseau discredits and distances himself from the mediating roles of Church and academy, withdraws into the company of the indeterminate and anonymous everyman, and retreats into the depths of his heart (with divinely-crafted conscience as guide) to recapture his innate moral sensibility.

The proposal is radical. Retreat—from vain ambition, from the path to academic success, from the "vanity and emptiness of those proud titles that dazzle us,"⁵³⁰ from the seductions of sophistic logic, from self-serving erudition—is nothing short of necessary. If virtue is inscribed on our very hearts (works of God's authorship), its acquisition calls for little more than looking inwards, withdrawing from a perverse society to retrieve our natural goodness.

⁵²⁹ *First Discourse*. CW II.22; OC III.30.

⁵³⁰ *First Discourse*. CW II.12; OC III.16.

The Pelagian overtones are explicit. Despite his earlier description of philosophical wisdom as a dangerous “fruit,” any mention of Adam’s debilitating legacy is conspicuously absent in Rousseau’s praise of human nature. Instead, he argues, we must place faith in our innate goodness. Foreshadowing his later, more explicit denial of Original Sin in *Emile*,⁵³¹ Rousseau insists from the outset that society—not man as God’s creation—is to blame. Natural man is above reproach, but socialized men are prone to wickedness. Rousseau’s unerring faith in natural goodness is nonetheless problematized by his polemics. There appears to be a discrepancy between his ontology and his empiricism, between his description of human nature and his observations of human society: if *man* is good, how can *men* be so wicked?⁵³²

The *Second Discourse* clarified this dilemma, presenting a concise genealogy of humankind’s fall from grace. In our natural state we are innocent and ignorant, pre-moral creatures bound only by *amour-de-soi* and *pitié*, sentiments that encouraged self-preservation and mutual sympathy. It was not until the emergence of civil society—a revolution following the advent of private property—that natural

⁵³¹ The *Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar* spawned the Pelagian controversy central to *Emile*’s censure. In defense, Rousseau reiterated the consistency of his works, citing his *Second Discourse*, *Letter to d’Alembert*, and *Julie* as being “imbued with the same maxims. The same modes of thought are not more disguised in them... and the Author’s profession of faith is found expressed there with less reserve than that of the Savoyard Vicar.” *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.26; OC IV.933. Compare this with the following statement from *The Confessions*: “I dare to say... what seems almost unbelievable, the profession of faith of that very Héloïse dying is exactly the same as that of the Savoyard Vicar. Everything that is bold in *The Social Contract* was previously in the *Discourse on Inequality*; everything that was bold in *Emile* was previously in *Julie*. Now these bold things excited no clamor against the two former works; thus they were not the things that excited it against the latter.” CW V.342; OC I.407.

⁵³² Rousseau stands by this logic in his *Letter to Beaumont*: “If man is good by his nature, as I believe I have demonstrated, it follows that he remains so as long as nothing foreign to himself spoils him. And if men are wicked, as they have gone to the trouble of teaching me, it follows that their wickedness comes from somewhere else.” CW IX.35; OC IV.945. For an extended discussion of this tension, refer to note 18 (above).

inequalities fostered social inequalities, that vicious divisions were introduced and reified by social institutions privileging the interests of few above the welfare of all.⁵³³

Although Voltaire famously chided that Rousseau would send us back to the woods crawling on all fours,⁵³⁴ the latter makes plain that humankind cannot retreat to a state of nature. Rousseau adamantly maintained that “such a return would be a miracle both so great and so harmful that only God could do it and only the Devil could wish it.”⁵³⁵ Society is, for better or (more often) worse, a necessary facet of human life. In later works such as *The Social Contract*, and writings on Poland, Corsica and Geneva, Rousseau presented concrete models of political reform, envisioning virtuous societies conducive to legitimized self-rule. Yet at this early stage, his prescriptive optimism was overshadowed by his brash skepticism. Although firm in his belief that human existence was inextricably tied to society, Jean-Jacques’ deep discomfort implied that if we could not return to nature, we might do well to withdraw.

Strong words notwithstanding, Rousseau removed himself in spirit more than flesh. His initial period of withdrawal took the form of contrariness, vocal retaliation against his illustrious peers and soon-to-be former friends. If anything, his

⁵³³ For Rousseau’s full account see: *Second Discourse*. CW III.43-55; OC III.164-179. He describes the “invention” of private property as a deceptively simple ruse: “The first person who, having fenced off a plot of ground, took it into his head to say *this is mine* and found people simple enough to believe him.” *Second Discourse*. CW III.43; OC III.164.

⁵³⁴ As Voltaire quipped, “[o]ne acquires the desire to walk on all fours when one reads your work.” *Letter from Voltaire to Rousseau*, August 30, 1755. CW III.102; CC III.317.157. Rousseau himself invited such barbs in a long author’s note of the *Second Discourse*. Although the note argues that there are “far better reasons to state in affirming that man is a biped” rather than a quadruped, his lengthy discussion prompted Voltaire’s famously biting dismissal. See: *Second Discourse* (Note III). CW III.68-71; OC III.196-198.

⁵³⁵ *Letter from Rousseau to Voltaire*, September 10, 1755. CW III.105; OC III.226.

unexpected decoration hardened this resolve. As he laments in *The Confessions*, “[t]he success of my first Writings had put me in fashion... [and] stirred up curiosity: They wanted to know this bizarre man who sought out no one and cared about nothing except living freely and happily in his way.”⁵³⁶ Recognized with awards and adulation, the subject of rampant “curiosity,” well on his way to best-selling⁵³⁷ fame throughout the continent, the *First Discourse* left Rousseau embroiled in the very life he so passionately loathed.

Clearly discomfited, Jean-Jacques responded by reiterating his central concern—society was a catalyst for corruption—in increasingly hyperbolic prose. The *Second Discourse*, substantively similar to his prize-winning piece, proved significantly more controversial. He attacked not simply the arts, but property, civil society, human history itself. This forceful work garnered further notoriety and increasing mistrust. Rousseau, a once-charming Luddite, had now ruffled far too many feathers.

If this paradoxical stance set him on a path to literal solitude, a turning point of sorts occurred in 1758 with his *Letter to d’Alembert*. The piece began with a bold proclamation: “I am at fault if I have on this occasion taken up my pen without necessity.”⁵³⁸ In sharp contrast to the “vain philosophical chatter” of his contemporaries, Rousseau claimed to illuminate “a practical truth important to a whole people.”⁵³⁹ The “truth” to which he alluded was the danger of a theater taking root in his beloved Geneva.

⁵³⁶ *The Confessions*. CW V.308; OC I.367.

⁵³⁷ This was, of course, prior to the publication of *Julie, or the New Heloise*.

⁵³⁸ *Letter to d’Alembert*. CW X.253; OC V.3.

⁵³⁹ *Letter to d’Alembert*. CW X.255; OC V.6.

What is curious is not that Rousseau rose to the defense of his fatherland—a common practice prior to his renunciation of citizenship in 1763—but rather the severity of his rebuttal. At first glance, Rousseau’s response outmatched on every level (passion, persuasiveness, depth, thoughtfulness, length) d’Alembert’s passing suggestions in an unremarkable *Encyclopédie* entry on Geneva.⁵⁴⁰ How, then, could this parenthetical interjection have elicited such a powerful reaction? Why did Rousseau really take up his pen in arms?

The Genevan described his motivation with a mix of self-deprecation and obligation: “My [Swiss] compatriots have no need of my advice; I know it well. But I have need to do myself honor in showing that I think as they do about our maxims.”⁵⁴¹ In scribing *d’Alembert*, Rousseau’s humility was overcome by his sense of obligation. Guided by honorific duty, he addressed an issue important, if not to a whole people, than certainly to his fellow *citoyens*.

Most striking in this brief introduction to *d’Alembert* is the seriousness with which Rousseau gauged the significance of his efforts. He considered the idea of a Genevan theatre a matter of grave importance, an instance when the false consciousness and alienation born of theatrical performance threatened the city in which he found an exemplar of modern civic virtue. The idea of a Swiss stage did not offend Rousseau because he putatively rejected theater (he had himself written several *petit* dramas, and directly dismisses such charges towards the end of

⁵⁴⁰ The phrase that incensed Rousseau is as follows: “*Genève* auroit des spectacles & des mœurs, & jouïroit de l’avantage des uns & des autres: les représentations théâtrales formeroient le goût des citoyens, & leur donneroient une finesse de tact, une délicatesse de sentiment qu’il est très - difficile d’acquérir sans ce secours; la littérature en profiteroit, sans que le libertinage fit des progrès, & *Genève* réuniroit à la sagesse de Lacédémone la politesse d’Athènes.” Diderot, *Encyclopédie*, Tome VII, pp. 576-577. It is generally recognized that Voltaire had “planted” this suggestion, as part of his broader campaign to bring theater to Geneva.

⁵⁴¹ *Letter to d’Alembert*. CW X.255; OC V.6.

d'Alembert). Instead, a theater in Switzerland posed very real dangers to the body of its people: to its virtuous *salon* culture and civil society, to its economic welfare and harmonious social fabric. What therefore drove Rousseau to write in this instance was his self-described citizen's duty to defend civic virtue.

That he wrote this work as an expatriate in France, and that he denounced one of the few *philosophes* who would later defend him following the tumultuous reception of *Emile* and *The Social Contract*, is no small matter. Rousseau, the self-imposed exile defending a city in which he would never again settle, attacked the work of a fellow intellectual relatively sympathetic to his writings.⁵⁴² These circumstances did not go unnoticed. On September 29, 1758, in his *own* letter to d'Alembert, Voltaire charged Jean-Jacques with "a double ingratitude." In attacking both "an art which he practices himself" and an author who had "overwhelmed him with praises," Voltaire decried Rousseau as an ingrate far more concerned with garnering attention than demonstrating loyalty to his friends, or adhering to his ideals.⁵⁴³ Jean-Jacques was unprincipled, sensationalist, and eminently untrustworthy; he was, in brief, a maverick unleashed, "a Diogène barking."⁵⁴⁴

Voltaire here compares Rousseau to Diogenes the Cynic, one of the most flamboyant figures in the history of Western philosophy. Diogenes earned his

⁵⁴² By relative, I am comparing d'Alembert's sympathy for Rousseau with those of his peers—notably, Diderot, Voltaire and Holbach. On June 15, 1762, d'Alembert wrote Rousseau to assure him that the French peoples applauded *The Social Contract* and *Emile*. d'Alembert was the only *philosophe* to offer such support, save Charles Duclos. In *The Confessions*, Rousseau seems characteristically ungrateful, harping on the fact that d'Alembert had not signed the letter. For Rousseau's account see: *The Confessions*, OC I.574; CW V.480. Quoted in Cranston, *The Solitary Self*, pp. 2-3. d'Alembert's letter appears in CC XI.1874.82-84.

⁵⁴³ We must again recall Voltaire's complicity in d'Alembert's *Genève* article, and his own vested interest in establishing a Genevan theater. Quoted in Cranston, *The Noble Savage*, p. 137.

⁵⁴⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 137. From Besterman XIX.D7842. See: Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers: Volume II*, pp. 23-85.

infamous reputation as a “mad dog” and a “Socrates gone mad” from spectacles such as masturbating in a public marketplace and urinating on a taunting crowd.⁵⁴⁵ Although Rousseau had earlier⁵⁴⁶ denounced the Cynic as a conspicuously absurd figure, their resemblance was commonly noted by the *philosophes* and even Rousseau’s later admirers.⁵⁴⁷ In his lectures on ethics, for example, Kant labeled Rousseau a “subtle Diogenes” whose work captured the Cynic “ideal of innocence or rather simplicity.”⁵⁴⁸ Whether affirmed in malice or praise, the similarities seemed obvious to those familiar with both men. As Heinrich Niehues-Pröbsting summarizes, “[t]he transition from Diogenes to Rousseau suggested itself, especially since Rousseau seemed to follow the tracks of the Cynic in his cultural critique and the idealization of untouched nature in the first and second *Discours*.”⁵⁴⁹ In short—and despite his own deeply personal interest in establishing a Genevan theater—Voltaire had a point.

Rousseau nonetheless actively resisted such comparisons.⁵⁵⁰ If the likenesses were as obvious and ubiquitous as Niehues-Pröbsting believes, Jean-Jacques turned a blind eye. He directly refers to Diogenes only thrice in his major works: in the

⁵⁴⁵ Both aliases were given him by Plato. See: Laertius, VI.40 & VI.54 (pp. 41 & 55). For Diogenes’ exploits see: VI.69 & VI.46 (pp. 71 & 27).

⁵⁴⁶ *Preface to Narcisse*. CW II.191; OC II.965.

⁵⁴⁷ Heinrich Niehues-Pröbsting, “The Modern Reception of Cynicism: Diogenes in the Enlightenment,” in *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*, R. Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 340.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 340. In support, he cites Maximilian Forschner’s 1977 work *Rousseau*, and Jean Starobinski’s article “Diderot’s Satire ‘Rameau’s Neffe’” (in *Das Rettende in der Gefahr: Kunstgriffe der Aufklärung*, 1990).

⁵⁵⁰ In circuitous fashion, Rousseau describes his Cynical attitude as a sort of temporary insanity brought on by urban living. After leaving Paris for Montmorency, he notes that “the spectacle of that big City’s vices ceased to nourish the indignation it had inspired in me. When I no longer saw men, I ceased to despise them; when I no longer saw the wicked I ceased to hate them. My heart, which is hardly formed for hatred, could no longer do anything but deplore their misery... and, without anyone noticing it, almost without noticing it myself, I again became fearful, accommodating, timid, in a word the same Jean-Jacques I had been before.” *The Confessions*. CW V.350; OC I.417.

Preface to Narcisse, the *Second Discourse*, and *The Dialogues*.⁵⁵¹ In *Narcisse*, Diogenes is quickly dismissed as a typical self-promoting philosopher.⁵⁵² In the *Dialogues*, Rousseau refutes the charge that his onetime career as a music-copyist was “an affectation of simplicity or poverty to copy an Epictetus or Diogenes” as many had claimed.⁵⁵³ Only in the *Discourse* does Rousseau demonstrate even passing sympathy with the Cynic’s agenda: he concludes that “the reason Diogenes did not find a man was that he sought amongst his contemporaries the man of a time that no longer existed.”⁵⁵⁴

Rousseau here refers to the famous anecdote, recorded by Diogenes Laertius, that Diogenes “lit a lamp in broad daylight and said, as he went about, ‘I am looking for a man.’”⁵⁵⁵ Rousseau’s affinity for this spectacle seems logical enough. If virtuous men were hard to find in ancient Athens, they were (he often reminded) nearly extinct in eighteenth-century Paris.⁵⁵⁶ Where Diogenes took to the streets, Rousseau took to his pen. In both cases, onlookers were asked to judge themselves

⁵⁵¹ Rousseau also refers to Diogenes in a letter written to Laurent Aymont de Franquières dated January 15, 1769. In it, Rousseau expresses a classically Cynical emphasis on action: “I think that everyone will be judged not concerning what he has believed, but concerning what he has done.” Later in the letter, he offers cautious praise of Diogenes who, in a fashion atypical of philosophers, followed his conscience when refuting Zeno: “Was it not this alone which made Diogenes walk as his only reply before Zeno who was denying movement?” See: *Letter to Franquières*. CW VIII.262 & 264; OC IV.1137 & 1139.

⁵⁵² *Preface to Narcisse*. CW II.191; OC II.965.

⁵⁵³ *Dialogues*. CW I.132; OC I.830.

⁵⁵⁴ It is worth noting that in the very next sentence, Rousseau evokes Cato—not Diogenes—as “the greatest of men” and a paragon of virtue “out of place in his century.” See: *Second Discourse*. CW III.65; OC III.192.

⁵⁵⁵ Laertius, VI.41 (p. 43). This was a recurring theme in Diogenes’ repertoire. Laertius records two other incidents with similar messages. First: when the Cynic is “asked where in Greece he saw good men, he replied, ‘Good men nowhere, but good boys at Lacedaemon.’” (VI.27) And second: “One day he shouted out for men, and when people collected, hit out at them with his stick, saying, ‘It was men I called for, not scoundrels.’” (VI.32)

⁵⁵⁶ Fénelon—whom Rousseau praised in the *Dialogues* as a virtuous man who “did honor to modern times”—provided one of the few notable exceptions to this rule. CW I.158; OC I.863-864.

against the weight of the accusation, to measure themselves against a standard of (natural) virtue far removed from their actual (social) condition.

At heart of these critiques was a shared appreciation of the self-sufficient life lived in greater accord with nature, and a vision of virtue rooted in simple adherence to this ideal. Yet if the Cynic preached simplicity as an antidote to society's corruptions, his life—like Rousseau's—was anything but. Indeed, even Diogenes' unlikely path to philosophy was characteristically colorful. Forced to flee his native Sinope over a money-laundering scandal and sold into slavery, this sudden escape transformed a banker's greedy son into an unruly philosophic gadfly.⁵⁵⁷ It was precisely his exile that forced him to seek "the means of adapting himself to circumstances" which he found in a strenuous model of philosophy aimed at inuring himself to misfortune.⁵⁵⁸

As with Rousseau, the Cynic began his career as a foreigner in an urbane city. Set adrift in Athens (the Paris to Sparta's Geneva), Diogenes grew disturbed by the decadence of his surroundings. He reacted by embracing hardship as a catalyst for self-sufficiency, and shunning the shallow pleasures (physical comfort, refined appearance, gluttony) in which his peers indulged. This aggressive asceticism taught him to become "capable of overcoming anything,"⁵⁵⁹ a resiliency he pressed upon his

⁵⁵⁷ As Laertius recounts, Diogenes fled Sinope (a port town in northern Turkey on the Black Sea peninsula) "because his father [the banker Hicesius] was entrusted with the money of the state and adulterated the coinage." Several accounts report very different findings: that Diogenes himself confessed to the crime; that he was coerced by workmen to do so; that the Delphic oracle gave him permission to alter currency and he mistook the god's words. See: Laertius, VI.20-21 (p. 23).

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid., VI.22 (p. 25). "When someone reproached [Diogenes] with his exile," Laertius writes, "his reply was, 'Nay, it was through that, you miserable fellow, that I came to be a philosopher.'" VI.49 (p. 51).

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., VI.71 (p. 73).

students by insisting they conform to a Spartan standard of living.⁵⁶⁰ He told a perfumed boy that sweet smells might “cause an ill odor in your life.”⁵⁶¹ He hugged snowy statues on cold days. He made a bed of a bathtub, and begged to a statue “to get practice in being refused.”⁵⁶²

By all accounts, Diogenes “was great at pouring scorn on his contemporaries.”⁵⁶³ And like Rousseau, he saved his sharpest contempt for the privileged classes. “He would,” Laertius recounts, “ridicule good birth and fame and all such distinctions, calling them showy ornaments of vice.”⁵⁶⁴ The marks of wealth signaled corruption: dependence upon trivial comforts and self-gratification, the antithesis of the Cynic ideal of *autarkeia*.⁵⁶⁵ Diogenes was particularly hostile towards philosophical esotericism, then epitomized by the teachings of Plato.⁵⁶⁶ Similar to Rousseau, the Cynic denigrated the value of philosophic discourse, arguing that actions spoke infinitely louder than words and were far more useful in teaching virtue. This is why he labeled a man who had requested his writings “a simpleton,” chiding “you do not choose painted figs, but real ones; and yet you pass over the true training and would apply yourself to written rules.”⁵⁶⁷ Clearly, philosophy rings hollow if preached but not practiced, just as wisdom is worthless if disconnected from

⁵⁶⁰ As Laertius recounts, “he taught them to wait upon themselves, and to be content with plain fare and water to drink. He used to make them crop their hair close and to wear it unadorned, and to go lightly clad, barefoot, silent, and not looking about them in the streets.” Ibid., VI.31 (p. 33).

⁵⁶¹ Ibid., VI.66 (p. 69).

⁵⁶² Ibid., VI.49 (p. 51).

⁵⁶³ Ibid., VI.24 (p. 27).

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., VI.72 (p. 75).

⁵⁶⁵ Often translated as “self-sufficiency.” This is a value championed by Rousseau as the basis of independence. *Autarchy* was also a Stoic ideal, a “moral argument” Starobinski describes as the lesson that “the soul must seek its gratifications within itself and among its own *possessions*, without calling upon outside assistance.” See: Starobinski, pp. 104-105.

⁵⁶⁶ According to Laertius, Diogenes regularly reproached Plato. In one example the Cynic ridiculed Plato’s theory of the forms, quipping that “table and cup I see; but your tablehood and cuphood... I can nowise see.” Ibid., VI.53 (p. 55).

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid., VI.48 (p. 51).

life. As if to punctuate his point, Diogenes (unlike Rousseau) left no writings: he conveyed lessons solely through vivid, often outrageous exhibitionism.⁵⁶⁸

Exiled in a decadent land, the Cynic's flamboyant strategy served a concrete pedagogical purpose. In order to demonstrate the folly of society, he acted out; in order to present a more virtuous alternative, he led by example; in order to disturb the status quo, he embraced absurd excess. Furthermore, by welcoming difficulty (and not simply ignoring hardship), he offered constant reminders of his integrity.

To validate his own writings, Rousseau likewise had to lead by example. Following the embrace of his *First Discourse*, he had no choice but to reiterate his resistance to society's corrupting influence; withdrawal offered proof of his critical detachment and testified to the sincerity of his writings. What Voltaire dismissed as hyperbole and ingratitude, Rousseau understood as the only honest position for one of his beliefs. In striking a self-distanced stance he stood much as Diogenes did two centuries prior, carrying a proverbial lantern through the streets of Paris to illuminate the failings of his peers. With the original Cynic's force and righteous moral zeal, Rousseau dared his readers to confront the dire direction human history had taken, and perhaps join him in standing apart.

* * * * *

Like his Pagan forebear Diogenes, Rousseau challenged his contemporaries to assess themselves and embrace the simple virtues of a more natural subsistence. He did so as an outsider, yet one deeply involved with the society whose welfare he so

⁵⁶⁸ Most of what we know today about Diogenes comes to us from the anecdotes collected by the ancient Greek historian Laertius.

steadfastly served. In a similarly dissonant manner, Rousseau's role as a recluse drew upon conflicting traditions: the demonstrative stance of Cynical exile, a Pelagian vision of natural goodness, and the moralizing tone of an Edenic narrative.

Following the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau maintained this precarious balancing act. Redoubling his efforts he published longer, more personally revealing, more ambitious works that touched upon the theme of reclusiveness. Some of these efforts were explicit addendums to earlier writings. The *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, for example, was described in a prefatory draft as being "at first merely a fragment of the discourse on inequality which I omitted from it as too long and out of place."⁵⁶⁹ Revised several times before completion in 1763,⁵⁷⁰ the *Essay* revisited Rousseau's idyllic depiction of the natural state:

Assume a perpetual spring on earth; assume water, livestock, pasturage everywhere; assume men leaving the hands of nature, once dispersed throughout all this; I cannot imagine how they would ever have renounced their primitive freedom and forsaken the isolated and pastoral life so suited to their natural indolence, in order needlessly to impose on themselves the slavery, the labors, the miseries inseparable from the social state.⁵⁷¹

The bounty and freedom of nature is matched only by the "slavery" and "miseries" of society. A study of extremes, Rousseau is hard-pressed to find a reasonable explanation for our socialization. Yet the effects of this revolutionary event are clear:

⁵⁶⁹ *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. CW VII.289; OC V.373.

⁵⁷⁰ Believed to have been completed in 1763, dating the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (as well as determining its relation to the *Second Discourse*) is a matter of some dispute amongst Rousseau scholars. For a concise discussion of these matters, see: CW VII.xxvii-xxviii. For two major critical discussions of the significance of the *Essay* in relation to both Western thought and Rousseau's *oeuvres*, see (respectively): Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, tr. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); and Jean Starobinski, "Rousseau and the Origin of Languages," in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*.

⁵⁷¹ *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. CW VII.310; OC V.400-401.

the earth of God's creation was now "adorned or disfigured by the hands of man."⁵⁷² For Rousseau, this development was born of desire rather than practical necessity. As he laments, "[t]he first languages, daughters of pleasure and not of need, long bore the sign of their father; their seductive accent faded only with the feelings that had caused them to arise, when new needs introduced among men forced each to consider only himself and to withdraw his heart within himself."⁵⁷³

Although "[s]peech distinguishes man from the animals"⁵⁷⁴ and thus constitutes an intrinsic human faculty, its spontaneous advent led us down a slippery slope. Once introduced, language evolved from an expression of natural sexual desire to a catalyst for self-interest, from the simple spontaneous outpour of *amour* to the corrupting influence of *amour propre*. The *Essay on the Origin of Languages* reinforced what the *Second Discourse* had already made plain: speech, like society, had innocent origins and unvirtuous consequences.

In both works, Rousseau refused to abandon a provocative dialectic: man may be naturally good, but his socializing inventions were deeply flawed. Having led us far astray from the idyll pastures of our natural content, the gravest consequence of this transition was moral. Consider Rousseau's "golden rule" as taken from the *Second Discourse*: "*Do what is good for you with the least possible harm to others.*"⁵⁷⁵ This negative sense of freedom recurs in *Emile*: "O what good is necessarily done to his fellows by the one among them, if there is such a one, who never does them harm! What an intrepid soul, what a vigorous character he needs for

⁵⁷² *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. CW VII.312; OC V.403-404.

⁵⁷³ *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. CW VII.315; OC V.407.

⁵⁷⁴ *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. CW VII.289; OC V.375.

⁵⁷⁵ *Second Discourse*. CW III.38; OC III.156.

that! It is not in reasoning about this maxim, but in trying to put it into practice, that one feels how great it is and how difficult of success.”⁵⁷⁶

The problem lies in the practice. How might we protect individual freedom in society, particularly in congested urban cities such as Paris? Perhaps, as Emile’s tutelage suggests, through withdrawal. Given the terms of freedom, solitude adopts a practical value underscored by a moral dimension. Isolated, we literally cannot harm peers with whom we have no contact; and in not causing another grief, we both act morally and revive some measure of natural goodness in a denatured world.

Rousseau affirmed the value of retreat in an author’s note in *Emile*:

The precept of never hurting another carries with it that of being attached to human society as little as possible, for in the social state the good of one necessarily constitutes the harm of another. This relation is in the essence of the thing, and nothing can change it. On the basis of this principle, let one investigate who is the better: the social man or the solitary man. An illustrious author says it is only the wicked man who is alone. I say that it is only the good man who is alone. If this proposition is less sententious, it is truer and better reasoned than the former one. If the wicked man were alone, what harm would he do? It is in society that he sets up his devices for hurting others.⁵⁷⁷

In addition to clarifying his position, this paragraph offered a direct rebuttal to a line in Diderot’s play *Le fils naturel*. Written shortly after Rousseau’s withdrawal to Montmorency, Diderot condemned solitude as the misguided reverie of a wicked misanthrope.⁵⁷⁸ “Il n’ y a que le méchant qui soit seul.”⁵⁷⁹ Clearly, Rousseau

⁵⁷⁶ *Emile*. E 105.

⁵⁷⁷ *Emile*. E 105.

⁵⁷⁸ For Rousseau’s recollections of the incident see: *The Confessions*. OC I.455-456; *Dialogues*. OC I.788-789. Readers might also compare Rousseau’s “golden rule” to Plato’s *Republic*, (I.335e) where, during a discussion of justice, Socrates concludes that “it has become apparent to us that it is never just to harm anyone.”

⁵⁷⁹ The full sentence is actually quite inflammatory. Diderot’s character Constance uses a Rousseauist argument (an ‘appeal to the heart’) to convince Dorval (a character based on Rousseau) that the “good man” exists only in society: “J’en appelle à votre coeur; interrogez-le; et il vous dira que l’homme de bien est dans la société, et qu’ il n’ y a que le méchant qui soit seul.” From *Le fils naturel*, Act IV,

disagreed. Instead, it was “only the good man who is alone.” Who is more harmful to his fellow citizens? Whose actions are more likely to jeopardize the welfare and freedom of others? A man removed from society, or a man caught within its nefarious webs?

Emile argues unequivocally for the former. Turning upon the principle of fortitude through solitude, the pupil’s education is an attempt to instill virtue in a child raised in accord with his innocent nature. In the final paragraph of Book III, the tutor summarizes Emile’s accomplishments. The carefully reared youth is a model individual: “He considers himself without regard to others and finds it good that others do not think of him. He demands nothing of anyone and believes he owes nothing to anyone. He is alone in human society; he counts himself alone. More than anyone else, he has the right to count on himself, for he is all that one can be at his age.”⁵⁸⁰ Here, then, is Rousseau’s idealized *solitaire*, a child raised sheltered from society. Retreat has cultivated a faultless individual, one with “no errors,” “no vices,” “a healthy body, agile limbs, a precise and unprejudiced mind, a heart that is free and without passions.”⁵⁸¹ Most significantly, “*amour-propre*, the first and most natural of all the passions, is still hardly aroused in him. Without troubling the repose of anyone, he has lived satisfied, happy, and free insofar as nature has permitted.”⁵⁸² In short, he is free at the expense of no one.

Yet this solitary bliss seems fatefully impermanent. After all, Rousseau reminds us, our sociability is a necessary evil. We have little choice in the matter; our

Scene 3. In: *Diderot: Œuvres, Tome IV*, p. 1113. For Rousseau’s reaction to this “scathing and harsh sentence without any qualification” see: *The Confessions*. CW V.382; OC I.455.

⁵⁸⁰ *Emile*. E 208.

⁵⁸¹ *Emile*. E 208.

⁵⁸² *Emile*. E 208.

very natures are defined by our interdependence. “It is man’s weakness which makes him sociable; it is our common miseries which turn our hearts to humanity,” he explains. Yet “we would owe humanity nothing [only] if we were not men.”⁵⁸³ Only God—completely independent and a model of perfect solitude—has no need of others. Man has no such luxury. “Every attachment is a sign of insufficiency,” Rousseau laments. “If each of us had no need of others, he would hardly think of uniting himself with them. Thus from our very infirmity is born our frail happiness.”⁵⁸⁴ Yet without this “very infirmity,” we would not be human. Much as Rousseau might admire *Robinson Crusoe*, the lesson is clear: no man is an island. Put more strongly, every man has need of others.

Evoking classical voluntarist descriptions of God as a completely self-sufficient, perfectly ordered whole unto himself, Rousseau reminds us that man is a far cry from such perfection: “A truly happy being is a solitary being. God alone enjoys an absolute happiness. But who among us has the idea of it?”⁵⁸⁵ By our very natures, no one; our mutual dependence defines our humanity. It is from this honest assessment that Rousseau’s vision of reform flows. He seeks to change our conventions, not our natures, employing the very faculties that have precipitated our fall from natural grace to legitimize the “chains” of our necessary attachments.⁵⁸⁶

However, to move forward we must sometimes first withdraw. Under dire social circumstances and extreme social pressures, retreat provides a politically useful action. Near the end of *Emile*, exile is presented as a necessary stage in the pupil’s

⁵⁸³ *Emile*. E 221.

⁵⁸⁴ *Emile*. E 221.

⁵⁸⁵ *Emile*. E 221.

⁵⁸⁶ To wit, such is the guiding principle of the general will under which self-interested individualism is applied in service of the common good.

carefully planned pedagogy. Ringing a clearly autobiographical note, the tutor describes with some melancholy a situation very much like Rousseau's own:

There are circumstances in which a man can be more useful to his fellow citizens outside of his fatherland than if he were living in its bosom. Then he ought to listen only to his zeal and to endure his exile without grumbling. This exile itself is one of his duties.⁵⁸⁷

As an allusion to Rousseau's own life, the lines read as a justification for his flight from Geneva. Exile offers not an excuse for "grumbling," but a civic duty to be accepted as the "most useful" means of serving a greater good (his *patrie*). Reiterating the utility of retreat, the tutor surmises that "[a]ll men who withdraw from the hub of society are useful precisely because they withdraw from it, since its vices come from its being overpopulated. They are even more useful when they can bring life, cultivation, and the love of their first state to forsaken places."⁵⁸⁸ His justification is twofold. First, withdrawal serves a pragmatic aim: depopulating "overpopulated" society and diminishing the congestion conducive to social vices. And second, the recluse can act as a type of ambassador. Removed from their homelands, stuck in "forsaken" cultures, their status and experience as outsiders allows them to import "life, cultivation, and the love of their first state."

Exile is also a casualty of serving the truth, the very pursuit to which Rousseau had dedicated his life. In his *Fragments autobiographiques*, he underscored the lonely, sacrificial fruits born of this calling: "Persecution has elevated my soul. I feel that the love of truth has become dear to me because it has cost me dearly. Perhaps at first it was no more than a system for me, now it is my

⁵⁸⁷ *Emile*. E 474.

⁵⁸⁸ *Emile*. E 474.

dominant passion... the most noble that can befall the heart of man.”⁵⁸⁹ Emile has no such bittersweet burden to bear:

But you, good Emile, on whom nothing imposes these painful sacrifices, you who have not taken on the sad job of telling the truth to men, go and live in their midst, cultivate their friendship in sweet association, be their benefactor and their model. Your example will serve them better than all our books, and the good they see you do will touch them more than all our vain speeches.”⁵⁹⁰

Privileged with the self-sufficiency and sound judgment of an isolated education, free of the truth-bearer’s onus, Emile must reemerge, return from withdrawal and act as a beacon amongst men, a “benefactor” and “model” applying his virtuous education to the service of his fellow citizens.

After all, he *must* reenter society. This is the final lesson pressed upon the pupil, and one whose events unfold to disastrous consequences in *Emile*’s sequel, *Les solitaires*. Harping on this outcome, Judith Shklar reads in Rousseau a deep and unflinching pessimism. Taking a grim view of his worldview, one which “offers no occasion for happiness or civic virtue,”⁵⁹¹ Shklar notes the dismal failures of Emile and Sophie to live amongst their peers: “The happy end of *Emile* is false,... and Emile’s character cannot reveal itself until he *really* becomes a man, that is, a suffering victim.”⁵⁹² As Rousseau readily admits, man surely suffers: “Always more suffering than enjoyment; this relation between the two is common to all men. Man’s felicity on earth is, hence, only a negative condition; the smallest number of ills he can suffer ought to constitute its measure.”⁵⁹³ Furthermore, this condition is

⁵⁸⁹ *Fragments autobiographiques* (18). OC I.1164.

⁵⁹⁰ *Emile*. E 474.

⁵⁹¹ Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, p. 214.

⁵⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁵⁹³ *Emile*. E 80.

symptomatic of human desire, a negative need defined by want or lack that “supposes privation, and all sensed privations are painful.”⁵⁹⁴

Given this dour assessment, we might well be tempted to follow Shklar’s lead and read Rousseau’s ontology as a manifesto of victimization. But rather than succumb to the weight of his own analysis, he describes how we may yet attain a measure of peace. As he writes in *Emile*,

In what, then, consists human wisdom or the road of true happiness? It is not precisely in diminishing our desires, for if they were beneath our power, a part of our faculties would remain idle, and we would not enjoy our whole being. Neither is it in extending our faculties, for if, proportionate to them, our desires were more extended, we would as a result only become unhappier. But it is in diminishing the excess of the desires over the faculties and putting power and will in perfect equality. It is only then that, with all the powers in action, the soul will nevertheless remain peaceful and that man will be well ordered.⁵⁹⁵

Here is the lesson of the *Second Discourse*, concisely captured: contentment is possible only if our desires do not exceed our abilities to satiate them. To achieve this balance we must accept, not lament, our natural limits as human beings. We must, to paraphrase *The Social Contract*, recognize what we are while striving to realize what we should be.⁵⁹⁶

“What is more,” Rousseau elaborates, diminishing the distance between our wants and needs conforms to the will of God: “the Author of things provides not only for the needs He gives us but also for those we give ourselves; and it is in order to place desire always at the side of need that He causes our tastes to change and be

⁵⁹⁴ *Emile*. E 80.

⁵⁹⁵ *Emile*. E 80.

⁵⁹⁶ Again, *The Social Contract*’s opening phrase—“I want to inquire whether there can be a legitimate and reliable rule of administration in the civil order, taking men as they are and laws as they can be”—establishes the dialectic between heuristic idealism and pessimistic realism that guides much of Rousseau’s work. *The Social Contract*. CW IV.131; OC III.351.

modified with our ways of life.”⁵⁹⁷ In society, our wants far outpace our needs. Rather than increase this artificial imbalance, we must recognize the virtue of self-restraint and contain the excess of desires that so disserves denatured man.⁵⁹⁸

As is often the case with Rousseau, he couples unflinching criticism with programmatic optimism, an exegesis of how things are with a vision of how they could be better. We should not therefore conflate his deep mistrust of society with abject pessimism. As with Diogenes, Rousseau’s harsh criticism was fueled by concern; the depth of his remorse spoke to the necessity of active reform (rather than debilitating misery). Similarly, retreat must not be confused with misanthropy; if anything, Rousseau loved far too deeply. In this, he was *not* alone. Taking recourse in solitude, he followed a Christian tradition in which withdrawal offers protection from temptation, allowing men to contemplate God while sheltered from the sinful distractions of society. To clarify this point, we need only examine the hagiography of a Stylite.

Some fifteen hundred years before Rousseau, when martyrs cared little for writing or reception, Saint Antony fled society to resist Satan’s sway. After retreating to a cave for twenty years, immersed in a life of self-imposed hardship, living on a strict diet of bread, salt and water while shunning humans and demons alike, Antony emerged with a clear sense of dutiful purpose: live humbly, do not fear hardship, place faith wholly in God. “Virtue exists when the soul maintains its intellectual part

⁵⁹⁷ *Emile*. E 151.

⁵⁹⁸ By Rousseau’s description, aligning our wants and needs serves both God and humankind; it reflects a deference to the divine will, and limits the self-destructive consequences of excessive desire.

according to nature,” he writes, “when it remains as it was made—and it was made beautiful and perfectly straight.”⁵⁹⁹

Predating Rousseau’s praise of natural harmony, Antony describes the human soul as God’s handiwork (and “God made nothing bad”).⁶⁰⁰ The virtuous life therefore demands that our minds embrace the divine model latent within our spirits. The challenge Antony imposes upon himself—and others seeking heavenly redemption—is to keep evil at bay, to resist the Devil’s malicious attempts to corrupt our pure relationships with God. External and internal fortitude are demanded of a holy battle against evil (personified by demons), where integrity is not merely an eventual aim but an ever-present necessity to resist corruption.

For Antony, as with both Rousseau and Diogenes, such enlightened fortitude is not borne of scholarly rigor. Rather, he proposes a decidedly anti-intellectual vision of wisdom, declaring that “none of us is judged for what he does not know, any more than one is counted blessed because he is learned and possesses knowledge.”⁶⁰¹ Sincere observance, undying faith, and (above all) prayer are the true means of self-betterment, for they offer proof of virtue (enlightened action), inspire personal determination, and solicit God’s spiritual support. Indeed, “for those in whom the action through faith is present, the demonstration through argument is unnecessary, perhaps even useless.”⁶⁰²

True faith is demonstrated by certitude, stability and consistency, no matter the corporeal challenges. If cultivating such strenuous devotion requires a concrete

⁵⁹⁹ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, Robert C. Gregg, tr. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 46.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 47.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid., p. 57.

⁶⁰² Ibid., p. 87.

model, Antony offers an unflinching example. While God is benevolent, a prolific author of righteous covenants, he is unfortunately much duller than the Devil. And it is this demon's outrageous efforts to corrupt that dictate the severe terms of faith. His efforts to tempt and torture the Desert Saint range from sloppy (throwing silver plates in his path) to severe (unleashing the apparitions of vicious beasts on his body). "How many wrestlings he endured... against destructive demons"⁶⁰³ in the desert, yet he maintained his poise and hurled holy words at them, and "they fled, being driven away by the remark as by a whip."⁶⁰⁴ The desert molds Antony into a warrior monk, a hero-hermit who fights Satan's many forms—greed, pride, doubt, deterrence, disgust, and lust—with righteous resistance strengthened by the courage of his convictions.

His methods proved wildly popular. A social loner, Antony drew stadium-sized crowds to observe him perched on a desert pole, where he won many over with physical proofs of the benefits of his faith (dispelling the demons of a man's daughter, inspiring his sister's virginity, foreseeing a despot's death). The ubiquity of Christian conversion only strengthened his resolve to serve God and spread His teachings no matter the consequences. As Antony confidently argued, "the faith and teaching of Christ, ridiculed... and persecuted frequently by rulers, has [nonetheless] filled the world."⁶⁰⁵ In spite of opposition, followers in every land had come to embrace the glorious truth of Christ.

No stranger to persecution, Rousseau also found solace in the physical proofs of his convictions. As evidence he looked to nature, a testament of God's

⁶⁰³ Ibid., p. 69.

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 70.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 88.

magnificence far more compelling than academic arguments or the catechisms of Clerics. As with Antony, Rousseau found virtue in abandoning himself to a perfect order. Yet because both recognized the imminence of temptation, be it the Devil's seductive measures or society's provocative pleasures (theater, recognition, wealth), they framed this quest in terms of aggressive isolation. Both saw training as a necessary stage in the service of higher truths, a means of self-fortification to remain steadfast in the face of corruption. And for Antony and Rousseau alike, the courage of their convictions was strengthened by looking inwards.

Furthermore, in both instances retreat was incomplete without reentry—returning to the belly of the beast, to a society prone to vice, as a living model of man redeemed. Antony returned from the mountains. Emile was reared as society's prodigal son. Even Rousseau (the citizen of Geneva) fancied himself an exemplar of sorts in France. Yet while Emile's imaginary fate is a matter of speculation, Rousseau's was not.

Just as Antony was followed and worshipped as a martyr to the truth, Rousseau was also revered throughout Europe, inundated with letters of praise and the author of his century's bestselling novel.⁶⁰⁶ His popularity amongst readers notwithstanding, the publication of *Emile* and *The Social Contract* met with almost immediate censure and led, quite suddenly, to his unplanned retreat. If Rousseau had seriously struggled to apply his ideas in practice, if he had praised withdrawal as a means to a civic end, he would have no chance to return bearing hope. Twelve years after the *First Discourse* took top prize at Dijon, Jean-Jacques was delivered a harsh

⁶⁰⁶ Namely, *Julie*. See: Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*

reproach: served with arrest papers and forced from his home, society had finally begged his leave.

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From the sociological exegesis of his discourses, to the remote, self-styled community of *Julie*,⁶⁰⁷ to *Emile*'s virtuous education sheltered from society,⁶⁰⁸ to his final bittersweet ode to solitude in the *Reveries*, Jean-Jacques' mistrust of social attachments grew ever more insistent and decidedly more personal. Contemporary society had not only evolved contrary to man's best interests; it had also done Rousseau a great personal injustice.⁶⁰⁹ Alienated by fractured relationships with friends and peers, condemned for subverting Catholic, aristocratic, and monarchical values, Rousseau was increasingly a man on his own. Retreat was finally—and unequivocally—pressed upon him following the 1762 publications of *Emile* and *The Social Contract*. These books were burned from Paris to Geneva,⁶¹⁰ its author criminalized for their content. Rousseau, the *wunderkind* who had denounced his own startling fame, excommunicated himself from his social and intellectual

⁶⁰⁷ See, for example, Rousseau's description of the Valais and his enchantment with the disinterestedness of its inhabitants: "The most agreeable part of their welcome, it seemed to me, was to detect in it not the slightest vestige of constraint either for them or for me. They lived in their homes as if I was not there, and I was free to do as if I were there alone." In this instance, solitude enables a negative freedom, the lack of imposition of another's will on his actions. *Julie*. CW VI 66; OC II.80-81. Readers should compare this to Rousseau's description of Geneva in his *Letter to d'Alembert*, in which he stresses his native town's independence as a mark of its freedom.

⁶⁰⁸ In contrast to *Emile*, *The Social Contract* envisions good citizens in a good society, a comparison beyond the immediate scope of this piece.

⁶⁰⁹ Rousseau's indignation was evident in nearly all of his writings after 1762, including the *Letter to Beaumont*, *Letters Written From the Mountain*, *The Confessions*, *The Dialogues*, and *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*.

⁶¹⁰ According to Rousseau, "*The Social Contract* was not burned anywhere except Geneva where it was not printed." The Genevan magistrates were threatened by the work's depiction of a constitution that very much resembled their own, and far less concerned with the more controversial *Emile*. *Letters Written From the Mountain* (Sixth Letter). CW IX.234; OC III.810.

community, and dared to attack both Papal and Enlightenment ideals, was now finally forced to abscond from the society which had for so long served as the object of his wrath.

Although this final stage of Rousseau's life marked a bitter withdrawal from society, he fled neither strictly of his own volition, nor into silence. On the morning of June 9, 1762, Omer and Guillaume Joly de Fleury, Attorney-General and Procurator-General of France, presented magistrate Maupeou's Parlement with an unequivocal indictment of Rousseau.⁶¹¹ Condemning *Emile* (and, more precisely, its deistic *Profession of Faith*) as subversive, seditious, impious and unholy, the brothers de Fleury called for the immediate imprisonment and interrogation of its purportedly blasphemous author.⁶¹² The clock had not yet struck ten. More than six hours later, when court officers arrived to execute their order by escorting Rousseau to the Bastille, their fugitive was already in flight to Switzerland and, soon after, the Prussian border.

Rousseau describes these events in great detail in *The Confessions*. He greeted rumors of imminent legal proceedings with a mixture of stubbornness and naïveté. "The dull roar that preceded the storm began to make itself heard and all slightly perceptive people saw very well that some plot was brewing over the subject

⁶¹¹ Cranston, *The Noble Savage*, p. 358.

⁶¹² In the June 9 warrant issued for his arrest, the French Parlement accused Rousseau of promoting "impious and detestable principles" contemptuous of religion, Church and King alike. From: *Extrait des Registres du Parlement, Arrêt de la cour de Parlement, Qui condamne un Imprimé ayant pour titre Émile, ou de l'Éducation, par J. J. Rousseau, imprimé à La Hage... M.DCC.LXII., à être lacéré & brûlé par l'Exécuteur de la Haute Justice*. The text is reproduced in the beginning of *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Citoyen à Genève, à Christophe de Beaumont, Archevêque de Paris, Duc de St. Cloud, Pair de France, Commandeur de l'Ordre du St. Esprit, Proviseur de Sorbonne, &c.* (Amsterdam: Chez Marc Michel Rey, 1763).

of my book [*Emile*] and myself that would not take long to burst out.”⁶¹³ Still, he admits that he lacked such meager awareness: “my feeling of security, my stupidity was such that, far from foreseeing my misfortune, I did not even suspect its cause after I felt its effect.”⁶¹⁴ French authorities sounded warning as they “began by rather skillfully circulating the idea that since they had dealt severely with the Jesuits they could not show a partial indulgence for books and authors who attacked Religion.”⁶¹⁵ Sectarian tensions mounted, a development that acutely affected Rousseau’s own creed. He learned in October, 1761 of the arrests of Francois Rouchette (a Protestant pastor) and the Grenin brothers (three Protestant laymen) in Toulouse, all of whom were executed weeks later.⁶¹⁶

Dark clouds were gathering yet Rousseau “remained calm.”⁶¹⁷ In spite of his megalomaniac paranoia—he speaks of “plots” hatched against him by “Holbachians,”⁶¹⁸ certain that “it was very much me they were after”⁶¹⁹—he still

⁶¹³ *The Confessions*. CW V.481-482; OC 575.

⁶¹⁴ *The Confessions*. CW V.482; OC 575.

⁶¹⁵ *The Confessions*. CW V.482; OC 575-6.

⁶¹⁶ The letter warning Rousseau was from fellow Protestant Jean Ribotte, who asked Rousseau to publish a manifesto on behalf of religious tolerance and write an appeal to the provincial Governor Duc de Richelieu. Rousseau refused, citing the Pauline doctrine of compliance. Ribotte also made the same request of Voltaire, who failed to act before the executions. For Ribotte’s letter see: CC IX.1498. For Rousseau’s response see: CC IX.1521. For a concise account of these events see: Cranston, *The Noble Savage*, pp. 299-301. It is also worth noting that only two months later, Ribotte alerted both Rousseau and Voltaire of the infamous Calas affair, again begging their intervention. On October 13, 1761, Huguenot merchant Jean Calas had discovered his oldest son dead (by hanging) in his Toulouse shop. Attributing the death to suicide, Calas was charged by local magistrates with murdering the youth to prevent him from converting to Catholicism. Incited by a wave of religious (and anti-Huguenot) intolerance throughout the region, Calas was condemned to death on March 9, 1762, and publicly broken on the wheel, strangled, and burned the following day. The execution led Voltaire, “*l’homme de Calas*,” to petition for religious tolerance. A panel of fifty judges was appointed to review the case, and reversed the ruling on March 9, 1765. Although this affair marked a catalyst in the reform of religious tolerance laws, it was not until 1787 that Louis XVI granted official tolerance to the Huguenots, and 1905 that Church and State were officially made separate in France.

⁶¹⁷ *The Confessions*. CW V.482; OC I.576.

⁶¹⁸ As “[t]he rumors increased and soon changed their tone” and “the threats became addressed directly at me,” Rousseau admits that he “did not at all doubt that this [rumor of the Parlement’s censure] was an invention of the Holbachians to seek to frighten me and to incite me to flee.” Rousseau is here

“could not resolve to flee.”⁶²⁰ Yet he was forced to confront mounting evidence. In a letter to M. le Maréchal from the Curate de Deuil, Jean-Jacques learned from a reliable source that

Parlement was to proceed against me with the ultimate severity, and that on a certain day, which he noted, a warrant would be issued for my arrest. I judged this warrant to be of Holbachian fabrications; I knew that Parlement was very attentive to legal formalities, and that to begin on this occasion with a warrant of arrest, before knowing juridically whether I acknowledged the book [*Emile*] and whether I was really its author, was to violate all of them.⁶²¹

But *Emile*, like all of his major works save the *First Discourse* and *Julie*, was openly inscribed with his name and self-appointed title: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Citoyen de Genève*.⁶²² He had already corresponded with the censor Malesherbes over its content, and had publicly wrangled with the French publisher Duchesne to ensure that it went to press in a timely fashion.⁶²³

The obviousness of the situation still seemed to escape Rousseau. Even after friends warned him of imminent legal action, he stubbornly refused to accept the increasing precariousness of his situation.

Since I felt very well that underneath all this there was some mystery which they did not want to tell me, I calmly awaited the event,

referring to Baron d'Holbach, a prominent *philosophe* and avowed atheist. *The Confessions*. CW V.482;OC I.576.

⁶¹⁹ *The Confessions*. CW V.483;OC I.577.

⁶²⁰ *The Confessions*. CW V.484;OC I.578.

⁶²¹ *The Confessions*. CW V.484;OC I.578.

⁶²² The *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* was attributed to a nameless “Citoyen de Genève.” See: OC III.1. *Julie*, the “Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps,” was described as being “Collected and Published by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.” OC II.3. In the *Second Preface to Julie*, Rousseau writes that he omitted the designation of his Genevan citizenship to “not profane the name of my fatherland; I only put it on writings I believe will do it honor.” CW VI.20; OC II.27.

⁶²³ Rousseau was concerned that the book would not be set in type in a timely fashion. As Cranston describes, “Rousseau suggested there were only two ways to thwart the pirates [from printing unauthorized copies], secrecy and diligence; and since there was no longer any secrecy about *Emile*, diligence was all the more necessary.” This supports the contention that people knew of *Emile* (and who its author was) long before it went to press. See: Cranston, *The Noble Savage*, pp. 300-301.

counting upon my uprightness and my innocence in this whole business, and only too happy, whatever persecution was to await me, to be called to the honor of suffering for the truth. Far from being afraid and keeping myself hidden, every day I went to the Chateau and in the afternoons I took my usual walk.⁶²⁴

Rather than face facts, he “was tempted to believe that the entire world had gone mad.”⁶²⁵ He attributes this to his certainty of vaguely defined conspiracy theories, a naïve faith in his own innocence, and a stubbornness to resist submission to the will of his persecutors. He retired to bed with his “usual reading at night”⁶²⁶—the Bible—and finished the *Book of Judges*, 19. It was then (at two in the morning) that his wife Therese and M. la Roche entered with a letter on behalf of Mme. le Maréchal⁶²⁷ from M. le Prince de Conti. “The fermentation,” Rousseau recalls the letter as having said, “is extreme; nothing can ward off the blow, the Court demands it, Parlement wishes it; at seven o’clock in the morning a warrant will be issued for his [Rousseau’s] arrest, and they will send to arrest him on the spot; I have obtained assurances that they will not pursue him if he gets away; but if he persists in wanting to let himself be arrested, he will be arrested.”⁶²⁸

After a brief conference with le Maréchal, Rousseau concluded that it was time to skip town. “I did not feel that I had either enough presence of mind, or enough skill, or perhaps enough firmness to avoid compromising her if I was sharply pressed. That made me decide to sacrifice my glory to her tranquility, to do for her

⁶²⁴ *The Confessions*. CW V.485;OC I.579.

⁶²⁵ *The Confessions*. CW V.485;OC I.579.

⁶²⁶ In light of the charges (of impiety), the more suspicious amongst us might view this claim as pandering. Regardless, Rousseau notably portrays himself as a pious Christian whose bedtime routine involved Bible study.

⁶²⁷ Mme. le Maréchal was a benefactor of Rousseau’s in Montmorency whom he describes earlier in *The Confessions* as “a lovable and powerful woman, to whom, in truth, I was becoming more attached day by day.” CW V.446; OC I.532.

⁶²⁸ *The Confessions*. CW V.485;OC I.580. For the correspondence to which Rousseau refers, see: CC XI.1843.

on this occasion what nothing would have made me do for myself.”⁶²⁹ The claim is passive, stubborn, and sacrificial. Rousseau leaves Montmorency to assuage the anxiety of his female friend. He follows his heart against his reasoned judgment, foregoing personal “glory” to calm his companion’s fears. Regardless of his retrospective reluctance, Rousseau’s flight was a harbinger of his life to come. Outlawed from Paris to Geneva, the publication of *Emile* set in motion Rousseau’s transformation from self-styled hermit to criminalized outcast.⁶³⁰

Rousseau’s resistance to retreat may still strike an odd chord. Had he not spent a career reiterating the practical, political and moral benefits of solitude? Yet even in his earlier embrace of reclusiveness, he never completely abandoned society. As *Emile* made plain, literal solitude was the fate of God, not man; the pupil’s seclusion was a prelude to the involvement so central to Rousseau’s concept of civic duty.

The Parlement’s arrest warrant changed everything. No longer granted the luxury of peripheral asylum, Jean-Jacques was now an outcast. Hounded from Môtiers to Bern, denounced by dear Geneva, he wandered in search of a homeland while decrying his fate. During this “not all unwarranted” paranoia characteristic of Rousseau’s waning years, Maurice Cranston argues, he “came to see himself as a social outcast and concentrated on writing autobiographical works aimed at revealing his essential innocence and truthfulness.”⁶³¹ He was indeed consumed with his own acquittal. His ensuing works—from the *Letter to Beaumont* and *Letters Written From*

⁶²⁹ *The Confessions*. CW V.486;OC I.580-581.

⁶³⁰ Following this conversion of sorts, Jean-Jacques’ subsequent writings reflect an impassioned need for acquittal. From *The Confessions* and *Dialogues* to the final *Reveries*, these later works bear the distinct burden of an author in search of redemption, either in the public’s or God’s eye.

⁶³¹ Cranston, *The Solitary Self*, p. xii.

a Mountain to the *Dialogues* and *Reveries*—were written with an eye for redemption, proffering numerous rejoinders to the grave injustice of his all-too-public persecution.

As an exile, Jean-Jacques felt compelled not only to defend himself but to confront the consequences of his now-literal solitude. Where his retreat had earlier served demonstrative and pedagogical purposes, he now approached reclusiveness as an intensely personal matter. This development is most evident in his final work, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. Rousseau begins his swansong by stressing its self-involvement, admitting (to whom, it is unclear) that “[t]here will be much concerning me in them, because a solitary person who reflects is necessarily greatly preoccupied with himself.”⁶³² Whereas Montaigne “wrote his *Essays* only for others,” Rousseau wrote “only for myself.”⁶³³ Taking self-examination as an enterprise in self-edification, his work’s overarching concern was not society’s progress but its author’s individual growth: “I will be happy if... I learn to leave life not better, for that is not possible,” he confesses, “but more virtuous than I entered it.”⁶³⁴

Crazier things have happened. After all, his entrance into the world was dubious at best. “Cast from childhood into the whirlwind of the world,” Rousseau confides, “I soon learned from experience that I was not made to live in it and that in

⁶³² *Reveries* (First Promenade). CW VIII.7; OC I.1000.

⁶³³ *Reveries* (First Promenade). CW VIII.8; OC I.1001. Rousseau’s charge is somewhat misleading. In his prefatory note “To the Reader,” Montaigne writes: “This book was written in good faith, reader. It warns you from the outset that in it I have set myself no goal but a domestic and private one. I have had no thought of serving either you or my own glory. My powers are inadequate for such a purpose. I have dedicated it to the private convenience of my relatives and friends.” This is not, as Rousseau suggests, the “complete opposite” of writing only for oneself. Furthermore, Montaigne’s work pursues self-knowledge through measured self-examination, the same “goal” (and methodology) that Rousseau sets for his *Reveries*: “to make myself aware of the modifications of my soul and of their sequence.” *Reveries* (First Promenade). CW VIII.7; OC I.1000. See also: Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, p. 2.

⁶³⁴ *Reveries*. (Third Promenade). CW VIII.27; OC I.1023.

it I would never reach the state my heart felt a need for.”⁶³⁵ His life was plagued with adversity, the pernicious twist of fate personalized as “undoubtedly a great teacher... [that nonetheless] charges dearly for its lessons.”⁶³⁶ Unfortunately, Rousseau was a slow pupil. “What benefits do I get from such late and painfully acquired enlightenment concerning my fate and concerning other people’s passions,” he asks during the *Third Walk*? “By coming to know men better, I have only felt better the misery into which they have thrust me; and while this knowledge has shown me all their snares, it has not enabled me to avoid any.”⁶³⁷

By the *Fifth Walk*, however, Jean-Jacques sings a slightly different tune. In reflecting upon his life’s experiences, he gleans not sadness but solace. “I regret these experiences in no way,” he now concludes, “since through reflection they have given me new insights into knowledge of myself and into the true motives for my conduct in a thousand circumstances I have so often deluded myself about.”⁶³⁸ For the beleaguered solitaire, life was a grueling test characterized by “years of agitation”⁶³⁹ which, in reflection, yielded retrospective clarity and eventual calm in the face of adversity.⁶⁴⁰

Rousseau’s ruminations still lead him towards a lonely conclusion: “of all the studies I have tried to undertake during my life in the midst of men, there is hardly

⁶³⁵ *Reveries*. (Second Promenade). CW VIII.18; OC I.1012.

⁶³⁶ *Reveries*. (Third Promenade). CW VIII.17; OC I.1011.

⁶³⁷ *Reveries*. (Third Promenade). CW VIII.17; OC I.1011.

⁶³⁸ *Reveries*. (Sixth Promenade). CW VIII.51; OC I.1052.

⁶³⁹ *Reveries*. (Third Promenade). CW VIII.24; OC I.1019.

⁶⁴⁰ Rousseau’s position here begs a comparison with Seneca. Following his exile from Rome, Seneca approached his banishment as a period of “retirement.” He used this opportunity for reflection to compose his *Epistulae Morales*, a work in which solitude is a catalyst for self-appraisal and measured self-growth. I discuss Rousseau’s awkward relationship with Stoicism—his self-proclaimed affinity and his decidedly un-Stoic behavior—in greater length elsewhere.

any I could not just as well have undertaken alone on a desert island.”⁶⁴¹ Far from facilitating his desire to engage with the world, his antagonists seemed to thwart him at every turn. “The greatest care of those who rule my fate having been to make everything appear only false and deceptive to me, an occasion for virtue is never anything but a lure they hold to draw me into the snare they want to enlase me in.”⁶⁴² The maliciousness of his nameless enemies weighs heavily upon his memories. Apparently resigned to being at their mercy and convinced that he cannot act independent of their influence, he retreats to a familiar refrain: “I know that the only good which might henceforth be within my power is to abstain from acting, from fear of doing evil without wanting to and without knowing it.”⁶⁴³

Presented as an epiphany of sorts, the sentiment was nothing new. His pledge of abstention harkened back to the “golden rule” of the *Second Discourse*.⁶⁴⁴ Invoking the exile’s duty first described in *Emile*—“to bear the yoke of necessity without complaining”—he again embraces inactivity and withdrawal as the key to his liberation. Could such passive resistance free him from the yoke of his antagonists? Only if Rousseau’s heart submitted to his mind; only if his reasoned conclusion regarding the chimerical folly of virtue could quell his desire to seek virtue. In Rousseau’s writings, Starobinski observes, “[t]he reflective man knows how to

⁶⁴¹ *Reveries* (Third Promenade). CW VIII.18; OC I.1013. Readers might here recall Rousseau’s fascination with *Robinson Crusoe*, although even Crusoe had Friday by his side. As the first book *Emile* is given to read see: *Emile*. E 184; OC IV.454-455.

⁶⁴² *Reveries* (Sixth Promenade). CW VIII.50; OC I.1051. Although the tone of this statement is unabashedly paranoid (and borderline deranged), its substance is consistent with statements from Rousseau’s earlier works on the safety and relative virtue of inactivity.

⁶⁴³ *Reveries*. (Sixth Promenade). CW VIII.50; OC I.1051.. Because Rousseau maintains the innocence of the human heart, he is accurately identified with Pelagianism. Yet he greatly mistrusts his active will when swayed by social or societal pressures. If such “artificial” forces so frequently manipulate and distort his “naturally” good will, does this render his affirmation of natural goodness moot? Put another way, might Rousseau’s mistrust of activity reflect a more orthodox vision of humankind’s sinfulness than his Pelagianism suggests?

⁶⁴⁴ *Second Discourse*. CW III.38; OC III.156.

govern the mind of the sensuous man.”⁶⁴⁵ Just as Wolmar guides Saint Preux and the Tutor controls Emile, so did Rousseau (the exile-in-reflection) now call upon Jean-Jacques (the sensual dreamer) to submit.

If action had indeed become futile and vaguely self-incriminating, Rousseau presented himself two alternatives: to await salvation at the hands of divine Providence, or abandon himself to his transcendent reveries. Although he began his *Confessions* invoking his day of reckoning (“Let the trumpet of the last judgment sound when it will; I shall come with this book in my hands to present myself before the Sovereign Judge”),⁶⁴⁶ his *Reveries* turned with equal eagerness to flights of imaginative fancy. The Island of Saint-Pierre became, through recollection, an earthly heaven which sparked in him “[t]he sentiment of existence, stripped of any other emotion... a precious sentiment of contentment and of peace which alone would suffice to make this existence dear and sweet to anyone able to spurn all the sensual and earthly impressions which incessantly come to distract us from it and to trouble its sweetness here-below.”⁶⁴⁷ Retreating from the frustrations of his physical life, Rousseau once again found solace in nature and dream.

Although he recognized God’s hand in his own misfortunes—troubles too swiftly orchestrated and coherently executed to be rooted in mere human will or non-determinate chance—he did “not go so far as St. Augustine who would have consoled himself to be damned if such had been the will of God.”⁶⁴⁸ Indeed, his deferential praise of God (the only true judge of innocence who alone is “the cause of my

⁶⁴⁵ Starobinski, 215

⁶⁴⁶ *The Confessions*. CW V.5; OC I.5.

⁶⁴⁷ *Reveries* (Fifth Promenade). CW VIII.46; OC I.1047. Reverie elevates Rousseau to a transcendent, divine-like state: “As long as this state lasts, we are sufficient unto ourselves, like God.”

⁶⁴⁸ *Reveries*. (Second Promenade). CW VIII.16; OC I.1010.

confidence”)⁶⁴⁹ rings somewhat hollow. Rousseau did not, after all, rebuke his earthly deeds as unpardonable sins. Quite the opposite, he stubbornly clung to his own experiences as the simultaneous evidence of his goodness (he lived honestly and truthfully) and source of his misery (others vengefully disagreed). Although acting with integrity, speaking his mind, and trusting his friends furthered the severity of his downfall, these experiences were without disgrace and even worthy of praise.

Kierkegaard understandably saw in this claim a notable dearth of Christian humility: “What he lacks is the ideal, the Christian ideal, to humble him and teach him how little he suffers compared with the saints, and to sustain his efforts by preventing him from falling into the reverie and sloth of the poet.” Far from a martyr, Rousseau simply “shows us how hard it is for a man to die to the world.”⁶⁵⁰ Despite asserting that self-examination has taught him the ability to accept hardship with Stoic (or even Cynic) aplomb, Rousseau suffered horribly. More specifically, he suffered as a man convinced of his innocence, not as a Christian who accepted his ontological guilt. He assumed his worthiness in the eyes of God, while deflecting culpability to those who controlled his corporeal fate.

Where men have failed Rousseau, the Lord will redeem him; of this he is sure. “God is just,” he concludes; “He wills that I suffer; and He knows that I am innocent. That is the cause of my confidence.”⁶⁵¹ But, as Kierkegaard reminds, who amongst us is innocent? Augustine spent every waking minute of a far more pious life affirming his own culpability. Maintaining faith is a grueling struggle for a man—

⁶⁴⁹ *Reveries*. (Second Promenade). CW VIII.16; OC I.1010.

⁶⁵⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals* (4: 252-253), as quoted in Starobinski, p. 384 n. 23. For additional discussion of Kierkegaard and Rousseau, see: Miller, *Rousseau: Dreamer of Democracy*, p. 190; Grimsley, *Rousseau and the Religious Quest*.

⁶⁵¹ *Reveries* (Second Promenade). CW VIII.16; OC I.1010.

even a Saint—painfully aware that his very nature is tainted by sin. Yet for Rousseau, “serene in my innocence,”⁶⁵² Divine contemplation offered detached peace of mind. “Let me, therefore, leave men and fate to go their ways. Let me learn to suffer without a murmur,” he concluded. “In the end, everything must return to order, and my turn will come sooner or later.”⁶⁵³ He was without blame, society guilty. In confidently casting this stone, what was there to fear from One who surely grasped this truth?

Rather than dreading his “turn,” Rousseau awaited divine judgment as a framed man anticipates a noble trial. Cherishing the inevitability of his redemption, he found one final companion in God—the only Being left who understood him. In the end, Rousseau the recluse still sought solace *in another*, a final grasp that illuminates the extent of his all-to-human attachment to attachment. Intoxicated by the comfort of his own reveries, certain that he had “never been truly suited for civil society,” convinced that “everything contributed to detach my affections from this world, even before the misfortunes which were destined to alienate me from it completely,” he seemed poised in the *Reveries* to finally retreat in peace.⁶⁵⁴

Still, one cannot help but sense that perhaps as he did with Emile (nature’s child pushed back into society), Rousseau had again set himself up to fail. His feet straddled too many islands: a love of man and a mistrust of men, faith in political reform and fear of hegemonic coercion, civic duty and social aversion, Cynic shamelessness and Christian faith. Was the solitude born of these tensions compelling, much less coherent? Did his recourse to reclusiveness illustrate the

⁶⁵² *Reveries* (Third Promenade). CW VIII.22; OC I.1019.

⁶⁵³ *Reveries* (Second Promenade). CW VIII.16; OC I.1010.

⁶⁵⁴ *Reveries* (Sixth Promenade). CW VIII.56; OC I.1059.

political and moral value of retreat? Did his appropriation of both spiritual and secular tropes coalesce into something practicable, or did his model of retreat collapse under the weight of its own conflicting concerns?

The temptation, as often befalls those confronting Rousseau, is to say that he failed—that his theory was too fraught with contradictions, his character too weak to realize the strength of his vision. But if we take him both as he was *and* as he wished to be, perhaps we may still redeem him in the end.

For Rousseau, retreat provided a necessary means of enacting a noble plan, of resisting societal corruption and girding oneself for the strenuous task of reform. Return was its necessary correlative, the final, unavoidable test of applying lessons learned in seclusion from the world to which we are inescapably bound. Only when Rousseau was fiercely unwelcome did he supposedly abandon his earthly ties, tilting his delicate balance by placing faith wholly in God and retreating into the solipsistic daydreams of a defeated, isolated man.

Still, it took Rousseau until the year of his death to convince himself that he had abandoned all hope. At that late stage, his acquiescence seemed terribly forced and somewhat suspect. If we survey the evidence of his life and thought we might instead conclude that Rousseau was never able to fully retreat, even when he had little choice. What Kierkegaard identified as a lack of humility might therefore be appraised as a deep-seated fear of abandonment—of relinquishing his civic duty and leaving his peers to stumble towards a very suspect fate. To be sure, Rousseau affirmed the virtues of passivity and inactivity, surrendering himself to nature,

reverie, and the forces that conspired against him. Yet he did so, Starobinski notes, “with such energy as to belie the passivity in which he sought refuge.”⁶⁵⁵

In 1762, Frederick the Great had this to say of the man to whom he granted asylum in Neuchâtel:

I believe Rousseau missed his calling. He clearly had what it takes to become a famous hermit, a Desert Father impressive because of his moral rigor and his self-castigation, or a stylite. He would have performed miracles, would have been canonized, and would have increased the catalogue of martyrs even more. Nowadays, however, he is seen only as a philosophical eccentric who tries to revive the sect of Diogenes after two millennia. It does not pay to eat grass and make enemies of all contemporary philosophers.⁶⁵⁶

By this analysis, it was Rousseau’s involvement—not his solitude—that ushered his downfall. Had he simply possessed the courage to abandon himself to an elusive ideal he might have achieved the glory of martyrdom. But as history proves, he could not stomach the severity of either Cynicism or Sainthood. Unlike Antony, he soiled his hands in the affairs of men and never fully transcended their influence. And unlike Diogenes, his outrage was a conceit adopted to mask the deep sensitivity of his soul. Rather than embrace either model wholly, Rousseau straddled the line. His life as a recluse was both demonstrative and resigned, righteous and profane. He found in solitude a value that only God possessed, and urged it upon a corrupt, congested world. He retreated—from Geneva, from Paris, from his peers, within himself—to rekindle the divinely-scribed goodness lodged deep within his heart. Yet in attempting to follow his conscience, he was freighted by the ever-present weight of social pressures and earthly concerns.

⁶⁵⁵ Starobinski, p. 248.

⁶⁵⁶ Taken from Frederick the Great’s letter to the Governor of Neuchâtel, Lord George Keith, in support of granting Rousseau asylum. Support notwithstanding, Frederick obviously took this opportunity to air his grievances against Jean-Jacques. Quoted in: Niehues-Pröbsting, 344-345.

Rousseau might only have heeded Frederick's advice to adverse consequences. After all, the uniqueness of his vision lay in its amalgamation, its stubborn mix of heuristic idealism and pessimistic realism, spiritual transcendence and political virtue, piety and profanity. There is something both humble and brash in a solitary thinker who nurtured both a Christian preoccupation with redemption and a Pagan emphasis on corporeal achievement. Yet as he writes in *The Confessions*, "I wished to live in independence but still needed to survive."⁶⁵⁷ Honest to the end, this, finally, is the lesson of Rousseau: dreamer and recluse certainly, but one very much involved with the society he never fully abandoned.

⁶⁵⁷ *The Confessions*. OC I.363; CW V.304.

Chapter 5: Church and State

...the true disciples of Christ must suffer persecution; but that the church of Christ should persecute others, and force others by fire and sword to embrace her faith and doctrine, I could never yet find in any of the books of the New Testament.

—Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*⁶⁵⁸

Now that there is no longer and can never again be an exclusive national Religion, one should tolerate all those religions that tolerate others insofar as their dogmas are in no way contrary to the duties of the Citizen. But whoever dares to say *there is no Salvation outside of the Church* should be chased out of the State...

—Rousseau, *The Social Contract*⁶⁵⁹

Had Rousseau abandoned his concern with either spiritual welfare or secular reform, he would not have struggled to envision a model of religious practice compatible with democratic values of liberty, equality and tolerance. He would not, in other words, have conceived of a Civil Religion. In *Letters Written from the Mountain*, Rousseau describes this chapter of his *Social Contract* as “researches on the manner in which Religion can and ought to enter as a constitutive part into the composition of the body politic.”⁶⁶⁰ The *Contract*’s most controversial section,⁶⁶¹ his effort to transform religious associations was met with immediate, unmitigated scorn by the Genevan Council.⁶⁶² Over two centuries later, criticism persists. Henri Gaston Gouhier interpreted *Civil Religion* as an unabashed argument for total secularization

⁶⁵⁸ John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1990), p. 25.

⁶⁵⁹ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.223-224; OC III.469.

⁶⁶⁰ *Letters Written From the Mountain* (Sixth Letter). CW IX.233; OC III.809.

⁶⁶¹ Readers should consult Robert Derathé’s summary in OC III.1498-1500.

⁶⁶² Helena Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva: From the First Discourse to the Social Contract, 1749-1762* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 258. For Rousseau’s response see: *Letters Written From the Mountain*.

of the state.⁶⁶³ More common rejoinders—such as that of Ronald Ian Boss—portray Rousseau’s model as a thinly veiled justification for religious coercion.⁶⁶⁴ Alfred Cobban notes that *Civil Religion* has greatly contributed to Jean-Jacques’ reputation “as the apostle of tyranny and an enemy to liberty in the state.”⁶⁶⁵ And Lester G. Crocker is most blunt, arguing that the practical consequences of Rousseau’s civic faith “can only be imagined from the worst excesses of the Terror, or Stalinism, or of Chinese communism.”⁶⁶⁶

It seems fitting that our paradoxical author should again draw so much ire. Perhaps part of this backlash is attributable to his task (reconciling two oft-conflicting, passionately-held belief systems) and personality (a controversial figure no matter his subject). Yet in one crucial aspect, Rousseau rendered himself an easy target: earnest or no, his intentions were subverted by a sub-par effort. Tersely developed as the last substantive chapter in *The Social Contract*, *Civil Religion* seems as conspicuously awkward a fit as the *Profession of Faith* did in *Emile*. Of meager length and polemic in tone, his engagement with this spirited topic smacks of afterthought and ambivalence.⁶⁶⁷ On one hand, Rousseau appears to follow in the footsteps of thinkers like Montesquieu,⁶⁶⁸ espousing traditional republican beliefs in religion as a necessary foundation of civic virtue. He also devotes a majority of the

⁶⁶³ Henri Gaston Gouhier, *Les méditations métaphysiques de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1970), p. 255.

⁶⁶⁴ See: Ronald Ian Boss, “Rousseau’s Civil Religion and the Meaning of Belief: An Answer to Bayle’s Paradox,” *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth-Century*, 84, 1971, p. 123-193.

⁶⁶⁵ Alfred Cobban, *Rousseau and the Modern State* (London: G. Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1934), p. 88.

⁶⁶⁶ Lester G. Crocker, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Volume II* (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1963), p. 184.

⁶⁶⁷ As Derathé notes, *On Civil Religion* was not in the draft of *The Social Contract* (the so-called *Geneva Manuscript*) that Rousseau initially sent to his publisher Michel Rey in December, 1760. OC III.1498. Only after one year, in a letter to Rey dated December 23, 1761, did Rousseau admit to adding this controversial section. CC IX.346.

⁶⁶⁸ See: Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller and Harold Samuel Stone, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), Part V Books 24-25.

text to denouncing religious practice's role within polities. Discussing three inclusive strains of worship—interior, exterior, and ecclesiastical—he concludes that all fail to cultivate a strong, unified social body. He insists upon the necessity of religious tolerance, yet his “civil” alternative regulates faith with an iron fist, even proposing the death penalty to non-compliers—a strong claim offered almost in passing, without due justification.⁶⁶⁹

Winston Churchill once quipped that politicians should be judged by the level of animosity they arouse amongst their opponents.⁶⁷⁰ If Rousseau were a politician today, he might give Bill Clinton a run for his money. But he was a political theorist, and must be judged on the value of his thought rather than the passion of his detractors. Considering its overwhelmingly negative reception, we might wonder if his glaringly brief chapter *On Civil Religion* possesses any value whatsoever. Why approach this problematic text when its author provides us with other works relevant to our subject? Because we are using Jean-Jacques as a lens through which to examine the relationship between religion and politics, and because *Civil Religion* offers the Genevan's most famously concise practical application of this subject, it begs closer scrutiny.

A measure of caution is nonetheless needed. In light of the heightened controversy we will proceed slowly, devoting considerable space to examining the development of Rousseau's argument along with his more notorious contentions. Keeping an eye to *Civil Religion*'s internal coherence while locating its affinity with (and context within) his broader *oeuvres* we will then assess its merits as the

⁶⁶⁹ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.223; OC III.468.

⁶⁷⁰ The full quote attributed to Churchill reads as follows: “I have always felt that a politician is to be judged by the animosities he excites among his opponents.”

practical solution Rousseau envisioned. In the final analysis, how does his “purely civil profession of faith” resolve the dialectic between secularism and spirituality? Does it present a viable means of reconciling the relationship between religious and political institutions? Or does it merely add flame to this still-burning fire?

* * * * *

Rousseau began his chapter “On Civil Religion” with historical conjecture: “Men at first had no other Kings than Gods, nor any other government than theocracy.”⁶⁷¹ Well before the period when “men could bring themselves to accept a fellow man as a master and flatter themselves that this was a good arrangement,” they looked to divine rulers for governance.⁶⁷² Religion therefore served an explicitly political function from the outset of human history. Long before the idea of self-rule—even that exercised by a monarch or prince—seemed feasible, the contemplation of heavenly figures provided a source of normative authority.

As he had in the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau again argued that socialization changed everything. Individuals formed loose congregations which (over time) evolved into nations, and citizens began to worship common deities legitimized by corporeal leaders. “By the sole fact that God was placed at the head of every political society,” Rousseau notes, “it followed that there were as many Gods as there were peoples.”⁶⁷³ Subsequent homogenization and centralization of these divine figureheads within territorial borders helped to define national identities, but it also

⁶⁷¹ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.216; OC III.460.

⁶⁷² Compare with the Vicar’s similar observation in *Emile*. E 288-289.

⁶⁷³ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.216; OC III.460.

enflamed national rivalries. Because “peoples foreign to each other and nearly always enemies could not recognize the same master... [nor] obey the same leader,” politico-theological differences became a source of conflict. “Thus,” Rousseau argues, “national divisions resulted in polytheism, and beyond that in theological as well as civil intolerance.”⁶⁷⁴ Despite these antagonistic conditions, he insists that religious wars were nonexistent in Pagan times. This is because “each State, having its own cult as well as its Government, did not distinguish between its Gods and its laws. Political war was also Theological.”⁶⁷⁵

This was certainly true of the Greeks, who brashly appointed themselves “natural Sovereigns” of foreign tribes. This claim of dominion followed a theological assumption: barbarians fell under Greece’s political jurisdiction because both peoples worshipped the same Pagan Gods (even if unwittingly so). Such rationale was also held by the Romans, for whom political and religious conquest was inextricably linked.⁶⁷⁶ Rome was, however, an Empire whose vast geopolitical expansion enabled the unprecedented spread of its deities. This phenomenon incurred a sort of theological globalization: “the Romans, having spread their cult and their Gods along with their empire, and having themselves often adopted the Gods of the vanquished by granting legal status... to them all, the peoples of that vast empire gradually

⁶⁷⁴ In describing these prejudices as “synonymous,” Rousseau establishes a core contention of his chapter *On Civil Religion*: religious and civil *liberty* (like religious and civil *intolerance*) are connected values. *The Social Contract*. CW IV.216; OC III.460.

⁶⁷⁵ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.216; OC III.460.

⁶⁷⁶ History confirms Rousseau’s analysis of the conflation between spiritual and secular authority. It was during Rome’s territorial expansion that *jus gentium* and *jus naturale* were formally codified, a political necessity to institute and regulate Roman Catholicism throughout a sweeping Empire, when the Mosaic Decalogue no longer sufficed to bind colonizers to colonies.

[came] to have multitudes of Gods and of cults, which were approximately the same everywhere.”⁶⁷⁷

Ironically, the very conditions which facilitated the proliferation of Rome’s religion also contributed to its diffusion. Because the burgeoning Empire was logistically incapable of micro-managing worship in newly-acquired territories, its pantheon’s authority eroded. Although Rome continued to export deities throughout its colonies, the sheer scope of its expansion prohibited the strict imposition and codification of Roman faith. Religious cults flourished in this absence of strong, centralized religious authority. In practice, nations incorporated into the Empire’s fold (that lay beyond their conqueror’s immediate grasp) continued to worship their own Gods even, Rousseau observes, with Rome’s legal approbation.

The emergence of autonomous cults within the Empire’s territories marked a catalyst for momentous change. Specifically, it ushered the separation between church and state, a radical schism with decidedly deleterious consequences. “By separating the theological system from the political system,” Rousseau laments, “this brought about the end of the unity of the State.”⁶⁷⁸ The divorce of religion from politics struck at the very heart of Pagan civic cohesion, and left subjects with two distinct, competing authorities. “It was under these circumstances,” Rousseau argues, “that Jesus came to establish a spiritual kingdom on earth.”⁶⁷⁹ Initially, Jesus and his followers sought merely to practice their worship without persecution from the state. Skeptical Pagan leaders sensed a graver danger, regarding the sect “as true rebels who, beneath a hypocritical submissiveness, were only awaiting the moment to

⁶⁷⁷ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.217; OC III.462.

⁶⁷⁸ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.217; OC III.462.

⁶⁷⁹ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.217; OC III.462.

become independent of the masters, and to usurp adroitly the authority they pretended to respect out of weakness.”⁶⁸⁰ Pagan fears were realized when, following Jesus’ cataclysmic death, “the humble Christians changed their language, and soon this supposedly otherworldly kingdom was seen to become, under a visible leader, the most violent despotism in this world.”⁶⁸¹

Rousseau’s sudden, sharp conclusion begs emphasis: the destructive relationship between religion and politics began not with their integration but their radical separation. To reiterate his argument, religious cults flourished as Rome’s political and spiritual authority weakened. The most enduring and infectious amongst these—Christianity—rejected the jurisdiction of secular governments in spiritual affairs, and anointed Christ mankind’s unequivocal master. As the Christian following increased so did its clergy’s political power extend, eventually ruling the very corporeal dominion it had originally shunned. The once-hunted cult of “the Way” became a prolific hunter: “[t]he spirit of Christianity has won over everything,” Jean-Jacques observes, in spiritual and secular realms alike.⁶⁸²

It was a victory not without cost. According to Rousseau, clerical dominance of secular polities crippled civil society. The seeds of disunity planted during Rome’s downfall had blossomed into governments divided by mutually conflicting loyalties to God and monarch. Civil and spiritual authorities butted heads, as this “double power has resulted in a perpetual conflict of jurisdiction that has made any good polity impossible in christian States.”⁶⁸³ Jurisdictional schizophrenia cultivated a

⁶⁸⁰ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.217; OC III.462.

⁶⁸¹ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.217-218; OC III.462.

⁶⁸² *The Social Contract*. CW IV.218; OC III.462.

⁶⁸³ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.218; OC III.462.

perpetual confusion under which “no people has ever been able to figure out whom it was obligated to obey, the master or the priest.”⁶⁸⁴

This was true even when master *was* priest. As Rousseau writes, the Kings and Czars of England and Russia—rulers who had “established themselves as heads of the Church”—were ultimately subordinate to ecclesiastical authority. Dual allegiances to earthly and otherworldly interests rendered them impotent. Their powers became more managerial than legislative: “They have acquired not so much the right to change [the church] as the power to maintain it.”⁶⁸⁵ As “ministers” subordinate to papal precepts (rather than autonomous “masters” of their realms), these leaders possessed neither the political nor moral authority to rule *or* reform the Church.

Papal dominance therefore posed a real-world threat to secular rule, one that Hobbes had identified a century prior. Like Rousseau he “saw the evil and the remedy” of divided sovereignty and “dared to propose the reunification of the two heads of the eagle, and the complete return to political unity, without which no State or Government will ever be well constituted.”⁶⁸⁶ Still, Hobbes’ monarchical solution was ultimately impractical; he underestimated the Church’s influence upon a single ruler, no matter how powerful. As Rousseau chided, he was a “Christian Author”⁶⁸⁷ who “ought to have seen that the dominating spirit of Christianity was incompatible with his system, and that the interest of the Priest would always be stronger than that

⁶⁸⁴ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.218; OC III.462.

⁶⁸⁵ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.218; OC III.463.

⁶⁸⁶ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.218; OC III.463.

⁶⁸⁷ Despite Rousseau’s certainty, Hobbes’ religious beliefs were—and remain—a matter of significant dispute. For a fine summary of the various arguments in recent scholarship see: Patricia Springborg, “Hobbes on religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, Tom Sorell, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 346-347, 369 n. 1.

of the State.”⁶⁸⁸ Hobbes should have known that his own solution failed to realistically anticipate organized religion’s predatory instincts. Sword be damned,⁶⁸⁹ the Leviathan’s rule would inevitably be subjugated by the power of the priests.

In all fairness, Rousseau’s dismissal obscures the thoughtfulness with which Hobbes confronted the politico-theological problem. After all, half of his *Leviathan* is devoted to the subject of religion. In Chapter 43 he explicitly identifies the competing pulls of secular and spiritual loyalties as the principal cause of civil conflict: “The most frequent pretext of Sedition, and Civil War, in Christian Commonwealths hath a long time proceeded from a difficulty, not yet sufficiently resolved, of obeying at once, both God, and man, then when their commandments are one contrary to the other.”⁶⁹⁰ Hobbes had a ready answer, one that showed deference to the divine will. In such instances “when a man receiveth two contrary commands, and knows that one of them is God’s, he ought to obey that, and not the other, though it be the command even of his lawful sovereign (whether a Monarch, or a sovereign Assembly,) or the command of his Father.”⁶⁹¹

⁶⁸⁸ In an author’s note, Rousseau offers a very concise explanation of the clergy’s uniquely potent authority. Fused “into a body” by a “social compact” (centered around communion and excommunication), priests cultivate a singular will. A “political masterpiece,” their covenant unites adherents “from opposite ends of the earth” under one common authority. This strong civil unity explains why the clergy “will always be master of [divided] peoples and Kings”: they, like the hypothetical citizens bound by Rousseau’s civil faith, derive political strength from adhering to a common, unified will. *The Social Contract*. CW IV.218n; OC III.463n.

⁶⁸⁹ Rousseau’s critique may sound hyperbolic, but he identifies a cogent problem with Hobbes’ formulation: namely, the fact that Hobbes’ source of regulative order—corporeal punishment, or “the sword”—holds little sway for those solely concerned with the afterlife and divine redemption. See note 44 below.

⁶⁹⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ch. 43 [321], p. 402.

⁶⁹¹ To support this claim Hobbes cites Matthew 10:28: “Fear not those that kill the body, but cannot kill the soul.” For Hobbes, divine retribution merits far more fear than the sovereign’s wrath. As he explains: “If the command [of the sovereign] be such as cannot be obeyed without being damned to eternal death, then it were madness to obey it, and the counsel of our Saviour takes place.” *Ibid.*, Ch. 43 [321], p. 403.

This solution to the “most frequent pretext” of civil strife is not as naïve as Rousseau would have us believe. Hobbes immediately recognized that his emphasis upon obedience raised a logistical difficulty: “men when they are commanded in the name of God, know not in diverse Cases, whether the command be from God, or whether he that commandeth, do but abuse God’s name for some private ends of his own.”⁶⁹² Although more staid in tone, these concerns revealed a sentiment consistent with Rousseau’s own mistrust of ecclesiasts. Just as “many false Prophets”⁶⁹³ bolstered their own reputations amongst ancient Jews with “feigned Dreams, and Visions,” Hobbes continued, “so there have been in all times in the Church of Christ, false Teachers, that seek reputation with the people, by fantastical and false Doctrines; that seek reputation (as is the nature of Ambition,) to govern them for their private benefit.”⁶⁹⁴ He, like Rousseau, was acutely aware of the dangers manipulative, ambitious priests posed to a gullible flock.

This common mistrust notwithstanding, they diverged sharply on two major theological points. First, Hobbes believed that “we are all guilty of disobedience to God’s Law” both ontologically (as descendents of Adam) and individually (“by our own transgressions”).⁶⁹⁵ And second, in *De Cive* he argued that the right to interpret

⁶⁹² Ibid., Ch. 43 [321], p. 403.

⁶⁹³ Rousseau directly levied this charge of “false prophecy” against Beaumont, evoking Moses in support of his refutation of miracles. The passage to which Rousseau referred comes from the Old Testament in *Deuteronomy* 13.1-3: “If a prophet arises among you, or a dreamer of dreams, and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder which he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or to that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” See: *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.70; OC IV.990.

⁶⁹⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ch. 43 [321], p. 403.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid., Ch. 43 [322], p. 403.

scripture—the basis of divine law—“belongs to individual *churches*.”⁶⁹⁶ As he explained, such a power falls beyond the jurisdiction of “civil authority” and must “depend either on the judgment of individual citizens or an outside authority. But it cannot depend on the judgment of individual citizens: that can be seen from the inconveniences and absurdities it would give rise to.”⁶⁹⁷ In sum, “it is the task of a *church* to settle disputes; and therefore it is for a *church*, not for individuals, to interpret holy scripture.”⁶⁹⁸ As a Genevan Protestant with Pelagian sympathies, Rousseau must have abhorred both conclusions.⁶⁹⁹ He viewed the relationship between God and man as a strictly private matter. Furthermore, as we have already seen, he championed mankind’s natural innocence and rejected the narrative of Original Sin. Given these profound disagreements, Rousseau could hardly have considered Hobbes an ally in the politico-theological debates.

The Genevan was born into a heritage that shunned Roman Catholic directives as intrusions upon the individual liberty to worship, breaches of political jurisdiction, and offenses to the lessons of the Gospel.⁷⁰⁰ On a more intimate note, this inherited anticlericalism was reinforced by personal experience.⁷⁰¹ No stranger to the ecclesiasts’ wrath, Jean-Jacques understood all-too-well the dangerous repercussions of openly defying orthodox precepts.⁷⁰² For such a widely-read public figure as he—

⁶⁹⁶ Hobbes, *De Cive*, p. 230.

⁶⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

⁶⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 231. See also: p. 245.

⁶⁹⁹ As he wrote to Voltaire, “whatever the Sophist Hobbes might have been able to say on this, when a man serves the State well, he does not owe an account to anyone of the matter in which he serves God.” *Letter from Rousseau to Voltaire*, August 18, 1756. CW III.119; OC IV.1072.

⁷⁰⁰ See: Rosenblatt, pp. 259-260.

⁷⁰¹ For a summary of Rousseau’s exile see Chapter Four above.

⁷⁰² Rousseau’s lack of anonymity separated him from other authors who dared take controversial stances on religion such as, most notably, Voltaire.

one who dared challenge the priest's authority—the politico-theological question was hardly academic.

On both general and personal levels, Rousseau was firmly convinced that the Catholic Church had overstepped legitimate spiritual *and* secular bounds. They abused their duties as a religious authority by dictating terms of material worship that both assumed humankind's intrinsic guilt and required rote (and hence unfeeling) repetition of hollow catechisms. And they exploited their political influence, purveying an agenda of particularist interests characterized by hegemonic intolerance and persecution. Subjecting citizens to their narrow interpretations of religious duty, positive law, and spiritual salvation alike, they subverted the very foundation of a healthy polity: civic cohesion reflective of a general will and grounded in the Gospel's benevolent, harmonious spirit.

In criticizing orthodox Catholicism, Rousseau had not merely entered a Scriptural debate. His charge denied the Church's authority as a legitimate mediator between man and God. Interior faith was a matter of individual conscience and personal belief; any ruling body which intervened contradicted the very will of God. If true faith was nourished in the heart, particular rites fell under the realm of public jurisdiction; exterior worship was by contrast a matter (as he quipped in *Emile*) of public policy.⁷⁰³ Yet following the terms established in *The Social Contract*, religious congregations (like any civic association) were legitimate only if they reflected a truly general will.⁷⁰⁴ By contrast, the unilateral dictates of papists

⁷⁰³ Rousseau here sides with the Vicar, who argued that "external worship, if it must be uniform for the sake of good order... is purely a question of public policy." *Emile*. E 296.

⁷⁰⁴ Furthermore, because God imbued us with an inherent sense of *pitié* and universal brotherhood, this unifying aim is consistent with Rousseau's understanding of adherence to the divine will.

cultivated a singular dogmatism which disserved both God and man. Correcting these abuses posed practical and political challenges: disavowing the Church of its sole authority in spiritual matters; and reforming public worship in accord with the democratic tenets of tolerance and civic unity.

As we have already seen, Rousseau insisted upon the necessity and utility of his thought. The pragmatic emphasis evident in his introduction to *Civil Religion* was equally explicit in the *Geneva Manuscript*.⁷⁰⁵ Rousseau began this earlier draft by stating his objective: “to put the machine in running order.”⁷⁰⁶ By “machine” he meant the political institutions that necessarily order social life. As in the *Second Discourse*, malfunction was a consequence of denaturalization, a development that created new needs which “bring us together in proportion as our passions divide us.”⁷⁰⁷ Although human beings are naturally innocent, socialization gave rise to wickedness. As our wants grew to surpass our needs, the “cupidity” exemplified by *amour-propre* weakened man’s sense of collective welfare and interdependence.⁷⁰⁸ The satiation of particularist desires undermined natural harmony, an intuitive sentiment which served as “the first bonds of general society” and “the foundations of... universal good will.”⁷⁰⁹ Still, “the more we become enemies of our fellow men”—the more we pursue personal gain at the expense of others—“the less we can

⁷⁰⁵ Although the sections I address (I.1 and I.2) of the *Geneva Manuscript* were deleted from *The Social Contract*, certain passages from I.2 are appropriated in Rousseau’s final chapter *On Civil Religion*.

⁷⁰⁶ *Geneva Manuscript*. CW IV.76; OC III.281.

⁷⁰⁷ Rousseau’s influence upon Hegel is evident in his dialectical analysis: “Thus the same causes that make us wicked also make us slaves and reduce us to servitude by depraving us.” *Geneva Manuscript*. CW IV.76; OC III.282.

⁷⁰⁸ *Geneva Manuscript*. CW IV.76; OC III.282.

⁷⁰⁹ *Geneva Manuscript*. CW IV.76-77; OC III.282.

do without them.”⁷¹⁰ This was a dilemma whose redress required hard labor, yet “universal goodwill” remained a “fruit everyone would like to reap without being obliged to cultivate it.”⁷¹¹

If effort was wanting, the need was undeniable. In society, a “new order of things gives rise to a multitude of relationships lacking order, regulation, and stability.”⁷¹² To further complicate matters, Rousseau admits that “nature’s gentle voice is no longer an infallible guide for us, nor is the independence we have received from her a desirable state.”⁷¹³ Human beings are, for better or worse, social creatures. In this deracinated state, we no longer follow (let alone discern) the guidance of our God-given conscience. Mankind is also painfully oblivious: “the sublime concepts of a God of the wise, the gentle laws of brotherhood He imposes upon us, the social virtues of pure souls—which are the true cult He desires of us—will always escape the multitude.”⁷¹⁴ This is because people are easily swayed. They are fed “senseless” Gods who, far from upholding morality and social cohesion, would lead them to “indulge in a thousand horrible, destructive passions... if Philosophy and laws did not hold back the furies of fanaticism.”⁷¹⁵

⁷¹⁰ *Geneva Manuscript*. CW IV.76; OC III.282.

⁷¹¹ *Geneva Manuscript*. CW IV.77; OC III.282.

⁷¹² *Geneva Manuscript*. CW IV.77; OC III.282.

⁷¹³ The remainder of this passage offered a sharp rejoinder to those (most famously Voltaire) who depicted Rousseau as overly-romanticizing nature. Here, however, Jean-Jacques is a hard realist: “We lost peace and innocence forever before we had appreciated their delights. Unfelt by the stupid men of earliest times, lost to the enlightened man of later times, the happy life of the golden age was always a state foreign to the human race, either because it went unrecognized when humans could have enjoyed it or because it had been lost when humans could have known it.” His bluntly honest assessment underscores the pragmatism that I argue is central to Rousseau’s formulation of Civil Religion. *Geneva Manuscript*. CW IV.77; OC III.283.

⁷¹⁴ *Geneva Manuscript*. CW IV.79; OC III.285.

⁷¹⁵ *Geneva Manuscript*. CW IV.79; OC III.285.

The problem, however, lies with sectarianism rather than religion.⁷¹⁶ “Ever since particular instructions became necessary, each People has its own ideas which it is taught are the only valid ones, and which lead to Carnage and murder more often than to harmony and peace.”⁷¹⁷ Rousseau instead urged us to “set aside the sacred precepts of the various Religions, whose abuse causes as many crimes as their use can avoid, and give back to the Philosopher the examination of a question that the Theologian has never dealt with except to the detriment of the human race.”⁷¹⁸ Although these lines were removed in *The Social Contract*, they strike an odd chord coming from one so mistrustful of the *philosophes*. Rather than read this as a reversal of Rousseau’s well-documented suspicions, we should recognize in his plea an unflinching indictment of those charged with religion’s keeping. Forced to choose (on society’s behalf) between priests and philosophers, he sides here with the latter.⁷¹⁹ Although this admission occurs only in passing (in a draft, at that), it underscores an insistence consistent throughout Rousseau’s *oeuvres* theologians have made a mess of religious institutions, a grievous gaffe for which humankind has paid a dear price.

Clearly, those charged with safeguarding and promoting that “greatest good of all” (positive religion) have failed men where they are most in need. As Rousseau concludes,

⁷¹⁶ Given Rousseau’s historical analysis of religious associations, readers might wonder if sectarianism and religion are fundamentally inseparable. Yet unless we allow him this crucial distinction, we cannot accept his “civil faith” as a practical alternative to despotic dogmatism.

⁷¹⁷ *Geneva Manuscript*. CW IV.80; OC III.286.

⁷¹⁸ For additional examples of Rousseau’s anticlericalism in *The Social Contract*’s final version (beyond his chapter *On Civil Religion*), see Book II, Chapters 6-7 and Book IV, Chapter 7. *Geneva Manuscript*. CW IV.80; OC III.286.

⁷¹⁹ Of course, Rousseau vacillates on this subject. In *Emile*, for example, he writes that “fanaticism, although more deadly in its immediate effects than what is today called the philosophic spirit, is much less so in its consequences.” *Emile*. E 312.

although there is no natural and general society among men, although men become unhappy and wicked in becoming sociable, although the laws of justice and equality mean nothing to those who live both in the freedom of the state of nature and subject to the needs of the social state, far from thinking that there is neither virtue nor happiness for us and that heaven has abandoned us without resources to the deprivation of the species, let us attempt to draw from the ill itself the remedy that should cure it. Let us use new associations to correct, if possible, the defect of the general association.⁷²⁰

Seemingly awash in despair, Rousseau draws hope from his faith in natural human innocence and divine beneficence. Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, God has not abandoned His worthy creations.⁷²¹ Rather than meekly suffer an inalterable fate, we must summon courage and employ that most human of traits⁷²²—perfectibility—to reform the “particular institutions” as necessary to human religion as governments are to socialized man.

Writing on politics, education and social relations, Rousseau used starkly honest critique—what I have previously referred to as *pessimistic realism*—as a catalyst for *heuristic idealism*.⁷²³ His approach to the politico-theological problem⁷²⁴ was no different. As with inequalities, religious intolerance was a byproduct of socialization, a corruption of the natural harmony instilled in us as creatures of God. The dominance of papists perverted the spirit of the gospel by dictating terms of salvation inconsistent with divine mercy and natural goodness, just as the Catholic church infected society by dividing citizens and sovereignty. As in the *Second*

⁷²⁰ *Geneva Manuscript*. CW IV.81-82; OC III.288.

⁷²¹ Rousseau immediately notes that “the human race... alone ought to decide [in such matters of faith] because the greatest good of all is the only passion it has.” In typically paradoxical fashion, Rousseau’s pessimistic realism and ontological optimism are in simultaneous evidence. *Geneva Manuscript*. CW IV.80; OC III.286.

⁷²² In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau argued that free will and perfectibility are uniquely human traits (unlike *pitié* and self-preservation, which animals possess). See: CW III.26-27; OC III.141-143.

⁷²³ For a further discussion of these terms, see Chapter One above.

⁷²⁴ As defined earlier, I use this term to mean the consideration of religion as it relates to politics.

Discourse, redressing these wrongs demanded drawing “from the ill itself the remedy that should cure it”: creating new associations to replace those that have failed us in politics, society, and religion alike. If positive religion is particularly adrift, and its reform is essential to a polity’s well-being, the task of instituting a civil religion is nothing short of imperative.

* * * * *

We might here recall that Rousseau begins *The Social Contract* in search of “legitimate and reliable rule.”⁷²⁵ His vision takes shape as strong citizenship guided by the general will, a unified volition shared and exercised by all. Reconceptualizing the relationship between religion and politics (a nexus of divided loyalties) is necessary to enact such valid political reform. If citizens do not resolve this debilitating tension, they will be left dazed and confused, ruled by “two powers, two Sovereigns”⁷²⁶—that of Christ as defined by a hegemonic church, and that of the state as putatively defined by a monarch.

In the *Second Discourse*, speculative genealogy laid the foundation for a sociopolitical critique of inequality. As in this earlier work, Rousseau’s introduction to *Civil Religion* served a similar purpose: identifying the source of a social problem in need of political redress. In both cases, an examination of the past established the context to better assess and correct present failings. We may here take a moment to

⁷²⁵ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.131; OC III.351.

⁷²⁶ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.218; OC III.463.

review Rousseau's historical account of religion, as it defines the problems theoretically solved by *Civil Religion*.

Although the relationship between religion and politics took the initial form of a relatively benign polytheism (much like early societies were characterized as loose congregations of cooperative individuals), it became a source of despotism amongst human societies. In the *Second Discourse*, the invention of private property marked a decisive turning point in the evolution of civil society. In *Civil Religion*, Rousseau locates a similar world-changing moment in the history of spiritual worship: the advent of theological intolerance between nation-states, and the subsequent export of deities to vanquished territories. Rome's overexpansion subverted this practice, as fringe cults sprouted throughout the Empire's territory. Amongst these, Christianity proved most enduring, and divested spiritual faith of its need for political affirmation. More strongly, Christians opposed an Empire's authority, drawing legitimacy from faith in a single omnipotent divinity, and creating an autonomous ruling body who answered to Christ above the Emperor. What began as a movement opposed to earthly involvement eventually grew to dominate corporeal affairs.

In addition to providing a conceptual and historical foundation for his argument, Rousseau's introduction establishes three main concerns. First, theological and civil intolerance—prejudices he describes as synonymous⁷²⁷—are products of human history, unnatural to the extent that (like inequalities) they develop with socialization and are nonexistent in the natural state. Second, politics and religion were intimately linked from the first seedlings of human society. This relationship was initially mutually beneficial, as divine rule served a normative, legislative,

⁷²⁷ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.216; OC III.460.

unifying political function. Third, this balance was fundamentally (and permanently) altered by Christianity, a faith that supplanted nationally-sponsored deities with a universal God whose authority was autonomous from (and far more powerful than) the state. This schism between religious and secular authority in turn created a political problem, the phenomenon of sovereignty divided amongst monarchs and priests. As Rousseau observes, the “sacred cult has always remained, or again become independent of the Sovereign, and without a necessary bond with the body of the State.”⁷²⁸ It was this “necessary bond” that he sought to repair.

Before developing his solution, Rousseau quickly distances himself from the fray of contemporary theological debate. Describing the two dominant poles of thought epitomized by “the opposing sentiments of Bayle and Warburton, one of whom claims that no Religion is useful to the body politic, the other of whom maintains, to the contrary, that Christianity is its firmest support,”⁷²⁹ he makes clear his distaste for such arguments. Rousseau’s overriding aim is to re-forge religion’s civic ties and reunite civil and religious faith, thereby imbuing strong democratic self-rule with religion’s unifying moral foundation. He dismisses *chic* theological and

⁷²⁸ Rousseau’s comments on Islam underscore the tolerance he grants non-Christian faiths: “Mohammed had very sound views; he tied his political system together well, and as long as the form of the Government subsisted under his successors the Caliphs, the Government was completely unified, and good for that reason. But when the Arabs became prosperous, lettered, polished, soft, and weak, they were subjugated by barbarians. Then the division between the two powers began again... [although] it is less apparent among the mohammedans than among the Christians.” Under this assessment, corporeal prosperity—and not beliefs intrinsic to the Islamic faith—injured Arabic civil unity; if anything, Christianity is more prone to divided sovereignty. This directly refutes Montesquieu’s conclusion that “moderate government is better suited to the Christian religion, and despotic government to Mohammedanism,” and offers a rejoinder to Locke’s proscription of the “Mahometan” as one who could not live in political harmony with Christians. See: Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, p. 461; Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, pp. 63-64; *The Social Contract*. CW IV.218; OC III.462-463.

⁷²⁹ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.219; OC III.463-464.

philosophical arguments as fundamentally irrelevant to his study, one guided by practical—not metaphysical—concerns.

Rousseau's aversion to theological debates reflects an even deeper conviction. As we saw in Chapter 3, he believed divine mysteries were ultimately impenetrable. Humankind was capable of discerning only the most general characteristics of God (omnipotence and beneficence) and His will (exemplified in the order of the natural world). Beyond these vague certainties, theological speculation was wholly indeterminate. Efforts to apply particular characteristics to a Being beyond human comprehension were vain in both senses of the word: ineffectual and unduly proud. Rather than attempt to settle questions irresolvable to the human mind,⁷³⁰ Rousseau strove only to “give a little more precision to the overly vague ideas about Religion that are relevant to my subject.”⁷³¹

Before developing his subject—a “purely civil profession of faith”—Rousseau begins with a typology, dividing religion “into two types, namely the Religion of man and that of the Citizen.”⁷³² The first “is the pure and simple Religion of the Gospel... and what may be called natural divine right,” an *internal* worship “without Temples, altars, or rituals.”⁷³³ The second is practiced by and within specific countries, an *external* worship of “dogma, rites, and external cult... prescribed by law.”⁷³⁴ Rousseau adds a “third, more bizarre, type of Religion which, by giving men two

⁷³⁰ Note that Rousseau here sides with the Stoic critique of rhetoric recounted in Plutarch's *Moralia*, Volume XIII, Part II, and discussed in Chapter 2 above.

⁷³¹ On the subject of clarity, although *religion* is (according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*) of “doubtful etymology” writers after Cicero frequently attributed its origins to the term *religāre*, “to bind.” Rousseau draws upon this sense of legitimate constraint in claiming that a purely civil faith can be regulated by a corporeal sovereign. *The Social Contract*. CW IV.219; OC III.464.

⁷³² *The Social Contract*. CW IV.219; OC III.464.

⁷³³ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.219; OC III.464.

⁷³⁴ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.219; OC III.464.

legislative systems, two leaders, and two fatherlands, subjects them to contradictory duties, and prevents them from being simultaneously devout men and Citizens.”⁷³⁵ He has in mind Roman Catholicism or “the religion of the Priest,” one that “leads to a type of mixed and unsocial right that has no name.”⁷³⁶

Rousseau immediately (and categorically) dismisses the “religion of the Priest” as being “so manifestly bad that it is a waste of time to amuse oneself by proving it.”⁷³⁷ Catholicism fails to uphold the most basic requisites of the social contract: it “destroys social unity” and “put[s] man in contradiction with himself,” rendering it “worthless” and—given Rousseau’s concept of divine order—fundamentally irreligious.⁷³⁸ The remaining categories have more forgivable flaws.

External worship “combines the divine cult and love of the laws,” a union that renders “the fatherland the object of the Citizens’ adoration.”⁷³⁹ Such a formula transforms the state into a “tutelary God,” a “kind of Theocracy in which there ought to be no other pontiff than the Prince, nor other priests than the magistrates.”⁷⁴⁰ If Rousseau appreciated such patriotic *eros*, he remained mistrustful of unilateral hierarchical authority. Like papists, theocrats conflated secular and spiritual jurisdiction.⁷⁴¹ Furthermore, their muddled creed was “bad in that, being based on error and falsehood, it deceives men, makes them credulous, superstitious, and

⁷³⁵ Readers should note Rousseau’s wholly dismissive numeration. By initially claiming that religion can be “divided into two types,” he implies that Catholicism (a “third, more bizarre, type”) barely even qualifies as a religion. *The Social Contract*. CW IV.219; OC III.464.

⁷³⁶ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.219; OC III.464.

⁷³⁷ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.219; OC III.464.

⁷³⁸ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.219; OC III.464.

⁷³⁹ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.219; OC III.464-465.

⁷⁴⁰ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.220; OC III.465.

⁷⁴¹ Furthermore, both Roman Catholicism and theocracy failed to coherently define (and subsequently separate) these two distinct domains. As a Genevan, Helena Rosenblatt argues, Rousseau was “particularly sensitive” to such matters. The experience of his *patrie* had illustrated the more dangerous “political uses of religion and... political implications of certain beliefs. He was well aware that some dogmas were being used by the authorities to depoliticize the people.” Rosenblatt, p. 261.

drowns the true cult of divinity in empty ceremonial.”⁷⁴² Under this system, the gospel was supplanted by arbitrary ritual, cultivating a faith based upon credulity and intolerance rather than the truth and harmony characteristic of God’s will.

Having examined the problems of state- and priest-based worship, Rousseau returns to his first category: “the Religion of man, or Christianity,” which he immediately distinguishes from “that of today.” The faith he envisions is a “saintly, sublime, genuine Religion, [which urges] men—all children of the same God—[to] acknowledge one another as brothers,” a bond which survives even death.⁷⁴³ From the perspective of civil society, the problem with Christianity is that it lacks any “particular relation to the body politic, [and] leaves laws with only their intrinsic force, without adding any other force to them.”⁷⁴⁴ Rousseau here resurrected a familiar critique of Christianity’s incompatibility with political action, describing earthly indifference as a symptom of solely focusing upon the afterlife. As he lamented, “far from attaching the Citizens’ hearts to the State, it detaches them from it as from all worldly things,” a phenomenon completely “contrary to the social spirit.”⁷⁴⁵ Even more strongly, he argued that “a society of true christians would no longer be a society of men.”⁷⁴⁶ Such individuals would be wholly united with God and wholly detached from their fellows.

This is because “Christianity is a totally spiritual religion, uniquely concerned with Heavenly matters.”⁷⁴⁷ Although true Christians are dutiful, law-abiding,

⁷⁴² *The Social Contract*. CW IV.220; OC III.465.

⁷⁴³ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.220; OC III.465.

⁷⁴⁴ In so doing, Christian corporeal indifference weakens “one of [society’s] great bonds.” *The Social Contract*. CW IV.220; OC III.465.

⁷⁴⁵ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.220; OC III.465.

⁷⁴⁶ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.220; OC III.465.

⁷⁴⁷ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.220; OC III.466.

moderate, incorruptible, brave and temperate, “[t]he Christian’s fatherland is not of this world.”⁷⁴⁸ Civil duties would be performed “with profound indifference for the good or bad outcomes of his efforts.”⁷⁴⁹ Whatever his state’s fortunes may be, the Christian either ignores its felicity or “blesses the hand of God that weighs heavily on his people.”⁷⁵⁰ He allows himself neither pride in his *patrie*, nor the will needed to reform a polity in decline. As we have already seen, this mirrors a fundamental division between Augustine and Pelagius. Augustine saw little hope in meaningful human reform, save constant vigilance carried out with the realization that redemption might only follow the grace of God. By contrast, Pelagius embraced corporeal improvement as a means of actively soliciting the divine Creator’s mercy. Arguing that salvation and earthly improvement were mutually constitutive aims, Rousseau seemed to side with Pelagius.

If the Christian state denuded citizens of their capacity for physical self-betterment, it possessed another fatal weakness. Such a polity could prosper only if “all Citizens without exception... [were] equally good Christians.” This is because those truly devoted to Christ are not simply indifferent to their corporeal fates; they are also utterly naïve, awash in blind brotherly love that makes them easy victims for even “a single ambitious man, a single hypocrite.”⁷⁵¹ Such ingenuousness combined with a passive attribution of fate to the will of God do not strong citizens make.

⁷⁴⁸ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.220; OC III.466.

⁷⁴⁹ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.220; OC III.466.

⁷⁵⁰ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.221; OC III.466.

⁷⁵¹ If Rousseau’s fear appears to be at odds with his belief in man’s natural goodness, we must recall that he hardly withheld from casting blame. Although *man* might be innocent by nature, *men* had certainly made a mess of denatured society. As with Pelagius, his faith in natural goodness never blinded him to the shortcomings of society. In this he (as an individual) differs sharply from the Christian for whom “charity makes it hard to think ill of one’s neighbor.” *The Social Contract*. CW IV.221; OC III.466.

Because the Christian's "essential thing is to go to paradise," they lack the worldly devotion needed to cultivate or defend their States.⁷⁵² Christianity may nourish deeper existential truths and worship a just deity, but—like natural man—its "true" practitioners are ill-suited for society. As Rousseau concludes,

I am mistaken when I speak of a Christian Republic;⁷⁵³ these two words are mutually exclusive. Christianity preaches nothing but servitude and dependence. Its spirit is so favorable to tyranny that tyranny always profits from it. True Christians are made to be slaves. They know it and are scarcely moved thereby; this brief life is of too little worth in their view.⁷⁵⁴

Passages such as these evoke thinkers from Machiavelli⁷⁵⁵ to Nietzsche⁷⁵⁶ who levied stark critiques against the slavish disposition of Christian faith. As Machiavelli wrote in the *Discourses on Livy*, "while our religion has shown us truth and the true path, it also makes us place a lower value on worldly honor."⁷⁵⁷ In addition, Christianity "has more often glorified humble and contemplative men rather than active ones," and "defined the supreme good as humility, abjection, and contempt of worldly things."⁷⁵⁸ Just as Rousseau asserted that Christians neglect corporeal concerns in an

⁷⁵² "Suppose that your christian republic is face to face with Sparta or Rome," Rousseau wonders. The results would not be pretty: "the pious christians will be beaten, crushed, destroyed before they have had time to look around, or they will owe their salvation only to the scorn their enemies will conceive for them." *The Social Contract*. CW IV.221; OC III.466-467.

⁷⁵³ For a comparison with Locke's similar assertion, see below.

⁷⁵⁴ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.221; OC III.467.

⁷⁵⁵ The association is none too favorable. In the 1539 *Apologia Reginaldi Poli ad Carolum V*, Reginald Pole described Machiavelli's works as "written by the finger of Satan," a not uncommon view amongst the more spirited detractors. It is nonetheless worth noting that, as with Rousseau, not everyone saw the Devil as Machiavelli's muse. In his massive 1668 *Apologie pour Machiavel* (commissioned by Cardinal Richelieu), Louis Machon defended the *Discourses* and *The Prince* as saintly efforts "drawn from the book of books" itself, the Holy Scripture. Peter S. Donaldson, *Machiavelli and the Mystery of State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. xi, 9 & 188.

⁷⁵⁶ In addition to *Genealogy of Morals* I.11, readers should also consult I.7, I.13, II.7, as well as the following: *Beyond Good and Evil* §62, 260; *The Will to Power* §8, 90; *The Antichrist* §571.

⁷⁵⁷ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, II.2 p. 158.

⁷⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, II.2 p. 159.

effort “to go to paradise,” so did Machiavelli argue that “in order to go to paradise, most men think more about enduring their pains than about avenging them.”⁷⁵⁹

If Rousseau’s indictment of Christian citizens followed Machiavelli (at times to the letter), it also resurrected Bayle’s depiction of Christian states as fundamentally apolitical entities.⁷⁶⁰ By reviving these controversial stances Rousseau seemed to enter the very theological debates he had dismissed mere pages earlier. Such apparent reversals make *Civil Religion* a particularly frustrating text, even by Rousseau’s paradoxical standards. Yet what appears blatantly contradictory more accurately alludes to a deep ambivalence. Rousseau insisted upon the necessity of integrating religious practice within legitimate political associations. At the same time, he recognized that organized religion historically opposed republican civic interests: theocratic states were built upon lies and cultivated credulous intolerance; and Catholic polities were dominated by dangerous dogmatists. Even “true” Christians were ill-suited to the rigorous corporeal duties of strong citizenship.

Each form of religious practice categorically undermines the conditions requisite of a prosperous civic body. None are capable of simultaneously preserving religion’s most beneficial elements (truth, harmony, connectedness, moral will) and the core values of legitimate polities (freedom, tolerance, unity). In all three instances, spiritual associations seem fatally incompatible with political associations, doomed either to dominate corporeal governance, supplant true faith with narrow-minded superstition, or create a citizenry fatally disinterested in worldly affairs. Before even sketching his alternative, Rousseau has planted a significant doubt: are

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid., II.2 p. 159.

⁷⁶⁰ Readers should refer to Pierre Bayle’s 1697 *Dictionnaire historique et critique*. For a refutation of Bayle see: Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* Part V, Book 23, Chapters 2 & 6.

religion and politics fundamentally incompatible, or can Civil Religion succeed where all others have failed? In provoking such uncertainty, he prods readers to question his very enterprise.

Because Rousseau seemed to portray religious associations as the proverbial oil to a healthy polity's water, it should come as no surprise that commentators have read his chapter *On Civil Religion* as a wholly secular plea in spiritual clothing and (more broadly) labeled its author emphatically irreligious. The evidence for such an interpretation lies in plain view. Yet as I have argued throughout, such conclusions dismiss a crucial element of Rousseau's thought: his sincere religiosity. To ignore this is to place him in the company of atheist *philosophes* such as Helvétius, Holbach and d'Alembert whose views, he argued in *Emile*, were more dangerous than fanaticism itself.⁷⁶¹ Religion fulfills a unique and fundamental role in the moral composition and civic harmony of communities. That dogmatic creeds nullify this value should compel rather than deter us to reform spiritual associations. An essential facet of human life, like social bonds they *must* be repaired.⁷⁶²

To justify this claim that Rousseau was a thinker equally committed to secular and spiritual well-being, we must nonetheless resolve the doubts his condemnation of Christianity rightfully raise. Rousseau's critique of the Christian citizen is problematic on at least three levels. First, it seems to render his very enterprise ("considering [religion] in relation to society") moot by placing religion in fundamental opposition to society. Second, it seems self-subverting when considered

⁷⁶¹ See: *Emile*. E 312.

⁷⁶² Again, this position sharply separates Rousseau from his atheist *philosophe* peers.

in relation to Rousseau's descriptions of himself as a "true" Christian.⁷⁶³ Finally, unlike his anticlericalism which attacks overtly (and actively) self-serving papists, it targets a relatively benign group: the genuinely faithful. What then are we to make of an argument to integrate religious practice into civil society that begins by dismissing even the most exemplary practitioners?

By way of explanation, Helena Rosenblatt argues that these "provocative statements... should not be taken at face value."⁷⁶⁴ Placing Rousseau's chapter on Civil Religion within the context of Genevan politics, she describes Rousseau's "strategy" as a method of "adopt[ing] and amplify[ing] the Genevan patriciate's version of Christianity, only to turn it against them."⁷⁶⁵ To secure their own political power, the patriciate "claimed that Christianity preached only otherworldliness, submission, and resignation."⁷⁶⁶ Rousseau simply took this conclusion to its logical extreme, describing a "Christian republic" as a contradiction in terms.⁷⁶⁷ According to Rosenblatt, his position was deliberate, a means of "provoking people to defend their religion and, in the process, to refute the patriciate's 'Christian submission'

⁷⁶³ For an assessment of Rousseau's self-description as a "true Christian" see Chapter Six below, where I discuss his religiosity through the lens of his "conversions" to both Catholicism (as a youth under de Warens' direction) and philosophy (on the road to Vincennes).

⁷⁶⁴ Rosenblatt, p. 263.

⁷⁶⁵ Rousseau himself substantiated this reading in a 1763 letter to Deluc: "The surest way to refute [the Genevan patriciate's] maxims is to force them to deduce the consequences of them themselves and to take them as far as they will go." From CC XVII.279-280, as quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁷⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 263-264.

⁷⁶⁷ Locke similarly claimed that "there is absolutely no such thing... as a Christian commonwealth." His argument was rooted in a technical reading of the Gospel, in which he finds no evidence that a commonwealth was ever "constituted upon that foundation" of Christian faith, or "in which God himself was the legislator." Lest we overemphasize their affinities, readers might also consult Rousseau's refutation of Lockean epistemology written in a 1755 letter to Voltaire: "The true principles of optimism can be drawn neither from the properties of matter, nor from the mechanics of the universe, but only by inference from the perfections of God who presides over everything." Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, pp. 52-53. *Letter to Voltaire* (August 30, 1755). CW III.115; OC IV.1068.

argument. Rousseau's readers had to choose: either Christianity does not preach submission, or its political relevance must be rejected."⁷⁶⁸

Because *Civil Religion* proceeds from the premise that religion is politically relevant, Rosenblatt argues that its exaggerated anti-Christian stance must be read as a negative lesson, a means of prodding readers to understand the dangers in categorically dismissing Christianity's political value. This was the very explanation Genevan minister Antoine-Jacques Roustan offered in an amicable retort to his friend's hyperbolic position. In *Ofrande aux Autels et à la Patrie*, Roustan wondered aloud if "M. Rousseau believe[s what he has written] himself."⁷⁶⁹ After all, Christianity requires good acts; it encourages self-sacrifice in the face of tyranny; and it preaches submission only as a last resort.

Yet if these values were well-suited to republicanism, and "if Christianity is so favorable to liberty, [why are there] so few free states in Europe?"⁷⁷⁰ Roustan provided a decidedly Rousseauist answer to this Rousseauist question: "because there are so few Christians."⁷⁷¹ As he continued, "an ambitious person... would have to think twice before attacking the liberty of a really Christian people, whose citizens would scorn riches, would lead a simple, laborious, frugal life, would love each other like brothers and future fellow-citizens of heaven."⁷⁷² This analysis tacitly suggests that greed and covetousness (qualities Rousseau associated with the Genevan patriciate), not humility and brotherly love, threaten strong citizenship. It also

⁷⁶⁸ Rosenblatt, p. 264.

⁷⁶⁹ Roustan was also instrumental in getting Rousseau's *Social Contract* approved (by the censors) and published. Antoine-Jacques Roustan, *Ofrande aux Autels et à la Patrie* (Amsterdam: Michel Rey, 1764), as quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 264.

⁷⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

⁷⁷¹ Readers should note that Diogenes the Cynic reached a similar conclusion when searching for a "real man" in broad daylight while holding a lantern. See Chapter Four above.

⁷⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 265.

reiterates an argument familiar to Rousseau's readers: religion *rightly understood* bears little in common with most contemporary religious practice.

Just as Papal abuses should not obscure true religion's value to humankind, Jean-Jacques' anticlericalism should not be confused with irreligiosity. Indeed, his vision of a legitimate society was grounded in a unified sense of duty or "moral will" which, in turn, "was dependent upon the existence of God."⁷⁷³ Did these convictions redeem him from charges of impiety? Rousseau certainly thought so. Revisiting *The Social Contract* in the Third of his *Letters Written from the Mountain*, he writes:

One cannot say... that I attack morality in a Book in which I establish with all my power the preference for the general good over the private good and in which I relate our duties toward men to our duties toward God; the only principle upon which morality can be founded, in order to be real and go beyond appearance.⁷⁷⁴

An obligation to serve God, fellow man, and the general good: these are the moral precepts Rousseau draws from his belief in a divine universal order. And as the "most reasonable and holy Religion on earth," Christianity powerfully affirms these duties.⁷⁷⁵

Jean-Jacques was emphatic on this point. Flatly denying "that Christianity is attacked in my [*Social Contract*],"⁷⁷⁶ he described it as "a book where the truth, utility, and necessity of Religion in general is established with the greatest force; where, without making any exception, the Author prefers the Christian Religion to

⁷⁷³ Despite their shared skepticism, this position clearly distinguishes Rousseau from that of Bayle. Rosenblatt, p. 265.

⁷⁷⁴ *Letters Written from the Mountain* (Third Letter). CW IX.191; OC III.758.

⁷⁷⁵ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.47; OC IV.960.

⁷⁷⁶ Again, what he *did* attack were "the distinctive dogmas of the Catholics" quick to condemn man in both this and the after-life. As Rousseau protested, "*to machinate*... is to do what certain people"—namely, Roman Catholics—"do against Christianity and against me." *Letters Written From the Mountain* (Third Letter). CW IX.190; OC III.757.

any other worship and the evangelical Reformation to any other sect.”⁷⁷⁷ Yet despite this praise, Rousseau never retracted his more disparaging sentiments about the “purely spiritual faith.” Clarifying his critical position, he argued that Christianity—although “making men just, moderate, and friends of peace” and being “very favorable to the general society”—“weakens the force of the political spring [and] complicates the movements of the machine.”⁷⁷⁸ Being “not sufficiently suited to [corporeal politics]... it must either degenerate or remain a foreign and cumbersome component.”⁷⁷⁹ Although Christianity served human life and livelihood, it was still a disembodied belief-system ill-equipped to impose the rigorous corporeal duties essential to a strong polity’s welfare. Rousseau’s conclusion, borne of realistically appraising the practical values and limits of different forms of religion, carved a sharp distinction between interior and exterior worship. In the process, it also forced readers to judge his project on its own explicitly social terms.

* * * * *

True religion neither divides nor oppresses humankind; it simply cultivates a healthy deference to divine order. Yet as Rousseau illustrated, religious associations rarely reinforced God’s harmonious will. In a 1755 letter to Voltaire, he blamed “the Priests and the Devout” for this failing.⁷⁸⁰ Rather than developing our moral sense by

⁷⁷⁷ It is worth noting that as evidence, Rousseau entreats readers (in an author’s note) to consult his postscript to the Vicar’s *Profession* in *Emile*. *Letters Written From the Mountain* (Second Letter). CW IX.159; OC III.718-719.

⁷⁷⁸ *Letters Written From the Mountain* (First Letter). CW IX.148; OC III.705.

⁷⁷⁹ *Letters Written From the Mountain* (First Letter). CW IX.148; OC III.705.

⁷⁸⁰ This was, of course, a typically Protestant stance that Rousseau here adopts.

preaching compliance with “the established order,” they “have Divine justice intervene” only when it serves their dogmatic teachings.⁷⁸¹ They supplant the *fraternité* and *pitié* natural to God’s creations with fear of papal authority and intolerance towards non-believers. And finally, because “it matters greatly to the State that each Citizen have a Religion that causes him to love his [civic and moral] duties,” they undermined the very requisites of healthy, virtuous polities.⁷⁸²

Rousseau’s alternative to such a divisive dogmatism was Civil Religion, a purely civic faith fettered only by “the limits of public utility.”⁷⁸³ Beyond this guiding principle, his formulation was purposefully broad.⁷⁸⁴ So long as religious worship did not conflict with society’s general interests, the specific tenets of the faith were irrelevant:

the dogmas of that Religion are of no interest either to the State or to its members; except insofar as these dogmas relate to morality, and to the duties that anyone who professes it is obliged to fulfill toward others. Everyone can have whatever opinions he pleases beyond that, without the Sovereign having to know what they are. For since the sovereign has no competence in the other world, whatever the fate of subjects in the life hereafter, it is none of its business, as long as they are good citizens.⁷⁸⁵

A sharp line is carved in stone. The State has no business intruding upon personal beliefs which do not compromise the general welfare of its citizens. Although our relationship with God is a sacred and private source of individual moral strength, religious associations must serve public interests and be held accountable to the same civic standards applicable to any legitimate community.

⁷⁸¹ *Letter from Rousseau to Voltaire*, August 30, 1755. CW III.116; OC IV.1068-1069.

⁷⁸² *The Social Contract*. CW IV.222; OC III.468.

⁷⁸³ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.222 OC III.467.

⁷⁸⁴ In this, Rousseau sides with the Vicar who argued that “particular dogmas” confuse and debase “notions of the great Being... instead of establishing peace on earth, they bring sword and fire to it,” making “man proud, intolerant, and cruel.” *Emile*. E 295.

⁷⁸⁵ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.222; OC IV.468.

Because the articles of such a “purely civil profession of faith” are less “Religious dogmas” than “sentiments of sociability without which it is impossible to be a good Citizen or a faithful subject,” they must be established by the Sovereign.⁷⁸⁶ Precepts essential to a polity’s moral health, they reflect only the most general, universally accessible tenets of the Gospel. In this, Rousseau sides with his Vicar: “The dogmas of the civil Religion ought to be simple, few in number, stated with precision, without explanation or commentaries.”⁷⁸⁷ Specifically, they require belief in “[t]he existence of a powerful, intelligent, beneficent, foresighted, and providential Divinity; the afterlife; the happiness of the just; the punishment of the wicked.”⁷⁸⁸ Rousseau also adds a strict civil caveat to these core Christian assumptions: “the sanctity of the social Contract and the Laws” must always be observed.⁷⁸⁹

From the outset, Civil Religion shows simultaneous deference to both divine and human order, vesting its authority in spiritual truths and secular precepts. Beliefs in an omnipotent God and the afterlife, and a righteous heavenly order which rewards justice and punishes wickedness are balanced by the inviolability of positive law defined by the general will. To these “positive” stipulations, however, Rousseau adds one crucial “negative” dogma: intolerance is proscribed.⁷⁹⁰ A caveat essential to upholding individual liberty, this final term reflects Jean-Jacques’ insistence that intolerance fundamentally opposes spiritual and secular freedom.

⁷⁸⁶ Pierre Burgelin rightly notes the spiritual quality of this secular covenant, a pact between citizens and sovereign that “must be called *sacred*.” This is because the social contract rests upon an act of *will*, what Rousseau described in the *Second Discourse* as a Cartesian ‘operation of the soul.’ As he made clear, “in the sentiment of this power [of willing] are found *only purely spiritual acts* about which the Laws of Mechanics explain nothing.” (My emphasis.) *Second Discourse*. CW III.26-27; OC III.142-143. Pierre Burgelin, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la religion de Genève*, p. 32.

⁷⁸⁷ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.223; OC III.468.

⁷⁸⁸ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.223; OC III.468.

⁷⁸⁹ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.223; OC III.468.

⁷⁹⁰ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.223; OC III.468-469.

His negative dogma also reveals a deep mistrust of a creed like Catholicism which “dares to say *there is no Salvation outside of the Church.*”⁷⁹¹ Such presumptuous sects should, on no uncertain terms, “be chased out of the state.”⁷⁹² Their expulsion is merited by crimes against both civil and theological order: claiming to monopolize the gift of salvation, ecclesiasts falsely usurp a power held solely by God; and they sharply divide polities by condemning those outside their flocks to Hell. This is certainly no way to build a congregation, much less a society. As Rousseau notes, on a practical level “[i]t is impossible to live in peace with people whom one believes are damned. To love them would be to hate God who punishes them. They must absolutely be brought into the faith or tormented.”⁷⁹³ A theological stance with decidedly despotic corporeal consequences, the Catholic position on salvation forces the Church to either “torment” or convert nonbelievers. Presenting itself as the sole executor of God’s will, this singular spiritual authority acts out of wrath and intolerance, rather than truly divine motives of forgiveness and love. Politically, the consequences of one creed claiming jurisdiction over an entire species’ eternal fate is devastating. If humankind’s greatest prize is controlled by a single dogmatic authority, then no citizen is free; even “the Sovereign is no longer Sovereign... over temporal matters.”⁷⁹⁴

Although Rousseau’s *exposé* builds a strong case for religious tolerance, closer scrutiny reveals a serious discrepancy in his argument: Jean-Jacques is wholly

⁷⁹¹ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.223; OC III.468.

⁷⁹² *The Social Contract*. CW IV.224; OC III.468.

⁷⁹³ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.223; OC III.469.

⁷⁹⁴ As Rousseau had argued in the introduction to *On Civil Religion*, under these circumstances “Priests are the true masters; Kings are merely their officers.” *The Social Contract*. CW IV.223; OC III.469.

intolerant towards the intolerant. “Without being able to obligate anyone to believe [its dogmas],” he writes, “the sovereign can banish from the State anyone who does not believe them.”⁷⁹⁵ Expulsion is a legitimate punishment not for the “impious” but for the “unsociable; for [a citizen] incapable of sincerely loving the laws, justice, and of giving his life, if need be, for his duty.”⁷⁹⁶ Those who reject Civil Religion reject the very terms of sociability critical to society’s well-being. Such dissenters cannot be trusted to uphold the rigorous demands of citizenship, or devote sacrificial love to a value (common welfare) or entity (the state) that transcends their own particular interests. Failure to accept a civil faith therefore indicates a fundamentally antisocial pathology punishable by the revocation of citizenship. Rousseau’s unbending tone is only reinforced by a sudden threat: “If someone who has publicly acknowledged these same dogmas behaves as though he does not believe them, he should be punished with death. He has committed the greatest of crimes: he lied before the law.”⁷⁹⁷

These sentiments are discomfoting for several reasons. First, Rousseau advocates banishment without so much as suggesting the possibility of individual reform or allowing space for public dialogue. Second, he is notably quick to violence, threatening the death penalty to those who lie “before the law.” And third, he seems to foster a culture of persecution; Civil Religion’s positive dogmas presumably exclude atheists from a state in which all citizens must recognize the

⁷⁹⁵ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.222-223; OC III.468.

⁷⁹⁶ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.223; OC III.468.

⁷⁹⁷ *The Social Contract*. CW IV.223; OC III.468.

existence of a beneficent Divinity.⁷⁹⁸ Rosenblatt argues that “Rousseau’s chapter on civil religion should be seen as an attack on the political uses of religion by an absolutizing and oligarchical regime,” yet his *Civil Religion* seems unapologetically draconian when taken on its own “simple” terms.⁷⁹⁹ How does a model built around the sanctity of tolerance, fraternity, and individual liberty so swiftly descend into a platform of forced exile and corporal punishment? Can a truly democratic society exclude any of its members, particularly atheists? Are such proposals even in accord with Rousseau’s own Golden Rule, to do “*what is good for you with the least possible harm to others*”?⁸⁰⁰ Or was Lester Crocker correct in labeling this work a premonition of twentieth century totalitarianism?

Lest the more sensitive readers amongst us conclude that our mercurial author has finally gone mad, we might offer two explanations in Rousseau’s defense. The first comes courtesy of Christopher Kelly and Roger Masters who locate within *Civil Religion* a “‘toughness’... that is often overlooked” in Rousseau’s thought.⁸⁰¹ Certainly, beneath the surface of his gentle reveries on nature, God, and the possibility of human redemption lies an unyielding backbone aligned with Spartan severity. Yet even Kelly and Masters soften this disposition, stressing “that for Rousseau, only behavior—and never an opinion or belief—can be punished by

⁷⁹⁸ Locke claimed that “those are not at all to be trusted who deny the being of God.” This was because contracts “[p]romises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist.” Although atheism qualifies as a “private belief” (and thus an individual liberty), *On Civil Religion* seemed to side with Locke. Each citizen had to uphold its four positive dogmas, including the recognition of God’s existence. However, as we shall see below, Rousseau’s position is more ambiguous; he also decried the persecution of atheism in an author’s note from *Julie*. See: Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, p. 64.

⁷⁹⁹ Rosenblatt, p. 267.

⁸⁰⁰ *Second Discourse*. CW III.37-38; OC III.156.

⁸⁰¹ CW IV.266, n. 140.

society.”⁸⁰² Their argument relies upon a generous assessment of Civil Religion’s jurisdictional limits. Rousseau certainly protects individual faith from magisterial authority, but he qualifies this liberty by insisting upon compliance with the four positive dogmas, and buttressing this condition with the threat of physical force. If, for example, denying the existence of the afterlife constitutes a rejection of the civil code (and, therefore, a crime against the social order), beliefs would appear to be punishable by law.⁸⁰³

No matter the degree, Civil Religion certainly exhibits “toughness.” But this should hardly assuage our fears. Instead, let us consider Rousseau’s controversial proposals within the context of his *Social Contract*’s broader aim: legitimizing the “chains” of denatured society by instituting associations under which equality, individual liberty and civil unity might flourish. For Rousseau, ecclesiastical dogma was anathema⁸⁰⁴ to such legitimate political reform. Because sectarian creeds posed ever-present threats to civil and spiritual harmony alike, their influence had to be contained at all costs. Forced to make difficult choices between a world liberated from the papist’s grasp and a polity which excluded members destructive of its civic unity, *On Civil Religion* unequivocally advocates the latter.⁸⁰⁵ We might therefore consider the intolerant terms of Rousseau’s civil faith as a sort of heuristic threat: the

⁸⁰² CW IV.266, n. 140.

⁸⁰³ Rousseau does not satisfactorily clarify his position, leaving readers to wonder if rejecting the positive dogmas constitutes a crime against the state, of if citizens might publicly profess adherence despite private disbelief, the very schism between belief and practice that he attributes Catholic coercion.

⁸⁰⁴ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, anathema is “anything accursed, or consigned to damnation,” a sense derived from its Biblical usage as “a thing devoted to evil, an accursed thing” in Paul’s *Romans* ix.3. I use it here purposefully to suggest the religious terms with which Rousseau’s phrased the problem of civic unity.

⁸⁰⁵ Again, we must also bear in mind Rousseau’s depiction of philosophic atheism as its own form of debilitating fanaticism in *Emile*. See: E 312.

lengths to which the author is willing to go in order to ensure that religious practice does not subvert the requisites of legitimate self-rule.⁸⁰⁶

Rousseau's hard-line stance should come as no surprise. After all, sometimes man must be *forced* into freedom.⁸⁰⁷ This was particularly true in politico-theological matters where only the combined forces of law, individual consent and group consensus could counteract sectarianism's strongly antidemocratic impulses. Although *Civil Religion* made painfully clear the difficulty of this challenge, grim reality (as in the *Second Discourse*) did not deter Rousseau from envisioning its fruition.⁸⁰⁸ Quite the opposite. Taking religion as it was and religious associations as they should be, dissatisfaction provided the impetus for radical reform. Yet even if his ambitions were well-intentioned, the intolerant terms of his proposal are still unsettling. In suggesting exile and the death penalty, was Rousseau subverting his own aims, substituting one form of intolerance (religious) for another (civic)? Did the "end" of civil liberty necessarily beg such questionable means?

⁸⁰⁶ As Rousseau stipulates, "the fundamental problem which is solved by the social contract" is to "[f]ind a form of association that defends and protects the person and goods of each associate with all the common force, and by means of which each one, uniting with all, nevertheless obeys only himself and remains as free as before." Because this solution requires each citizen's willful support, anyone who rejects the essential articles of a Civil Religion refuse the terms of legitimate association. *The Social Contract*. CW IV.138; OC III.360.

⁸⁰⁷ As Rousseau (in)famously argued, "in order for the social compact not to be an ineffectual formula, it tacitly includes the following engagement, which alone can give force to the others: that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the entire body; which means only that he will be forced to be free." *The Social Contract*. CW IV.141; OC III.364.

⁸⁰⁸ If Rousseau's idealized visions presented a theodicy of sorts (the best possible world), they also reflected his acute critical awareness and ability to compromise. Even his most seemingly impracticable proposals establish heights towards which humankind *should* strive, no matter if evidence suggests we will fall short; this is what I have termed Rousseau's "heuristic idealism" throughout. To my mind, the best illustration of this dynamic is revealed in a comparison between *The Social Contract* and *On the Government of Poland*. In his *Contract*, Rousseau lists apparently necessary qualities of people "suited for legislation" which, by the authors own admission, are "hard to find together." (In all of Europe only Corsica was "still... capable of legislation.") Poland—a large, diffuse, disunited nation threatened by foreign invaders on multiple fronts—was particularly ill-suited to the *Contract's* terms. Yet this did not prevent Rousseau from earnestly envisioning reforms which would allow the Poles rewrite their history and work towards a more legitimate political future. *The Social Contract*. CW IV.162; OC III.390-391.

As an attempt to marry religious and political faiths under a liberal democratic framework, *On Civil Religion* marked an auspicious beginning. Even Rousseau himself seemed unsatisfied with its outcome. Subsequent correspondences to his friend Moulton and the pastor Usteri find him both clarifying and even modifying his position.⁸⁰⁹ He further refined his stance in the *Letter to Beaumont*, adhering to *Civil Religion*'s core assertions while abandoning its more reactionary threats. Rousseau began by repeating a refrain consistent throughout his works: "if man is made for society, the truest Religion is also the most social and the most humane."⁸¹⁰ Still, he forthrightly admitted that "this sentiment is subject to great difficulties from the historical account and the facts that contradict it."⁸¹¹ As he elaborated,

I neither say nor think there is no good Religion on earth. But I do say, and it is only too true, that there is none among those that are or have been dominant that has not cruelly wounded humanity. All parties have tormented their brothers, all have offered to God sacrifices of human blood. Whatever the source of these contradictions, they exist. Is it a crime to want to eliminate them?⁸¹²

Here, in a nutshell, was Rousseau's self-defense of *Civil Religion*. His text did not categorically condemn "Religion on earth"; it merely recognized a problem in need of redress, the fact that "dominant" religions had scorched God's earth, shed man's blood, and wounded social unity.

As explanations go, Rousseau's was conspicuously unrepentant. He forced a dubious distinction between practical observation and profane censure, one further blurred by his subsequent critique of the meek masses. If creeds had "cruelly

⁸⁰⁹ See: CC XVI.2626, 2662, 2768; and XV.2825.

⁸¹⁰ Rousseau completes this sentence with a refutation of ontological guilt: "For God wants us to be as he made us, and if it were true that he had made us wicked, it would be disobeying him to want to cease being so." *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.54; OC IV.969. Readers should compare this with *Emile*. E 212, 281.

⁸¹¹ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.54; OC IV.970.

⁸¹² *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.55; OC IV.970-971.

wounded humanity,” their followers voiced little objection. As Rousseau lamented, “[p]eople submit in silence,” conforming without protest to the pernicious precepts of domineering papists.⁸¹³ Despite appearances, Jean-Jacques was not simply decrying the subservience of a slavish flock. He viewed such complicity as a natural reaction to clerical coercion. Indeed, his point was even firmer: outer compliance did not reveal inward complicity because individual belief systems could not be bullied into submission.

He was hardly the first to air such opinions. Luther had argued forcefully that outward obedience offered little proof of sincere conviction; unlike motives or faith, good works were easily contrived.⁸¹⁴ And in his *Letter Concerning Toleration*, Locke insisted that “no man can, [even] if he would, conform his faith to the dictates of another.”⁸¹⁵ Because “the life and power of true religion consists in the inward and full persuasion of the true mind[,] faith is not faith without believing.”⁸¹⁶ Furthermore, for Locke “the liberty of conscience is every man’s natural right.”⁸¹⁷ Rousseau likewise championed the sanctity of individual conscience, and agreed that

⁸¹³ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.57; OC IV.973.

⁸¹⁴ We must recall that Luther, unlike Rousseau, was (as Quentin Skinner perfectly puts it) “obsessed by the idea of man’s complete unworthiness.” His argument that “[g]ood works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works” refuted the papal authority in granting “indulgences” (remissions of temporal sins through penance), but it also served to instill a self-deprecating fear of God in a species profoundly incapable of affecting its eternal fate. Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* in *Selections From His Writings*, p. 69. Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: Volume Two: The Age of Reformation* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 3.

⁸¹⁵ Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, p. 19.

⁸¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁸¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65

external force did not cultivate internal conviction. Superficial compliance to orthodox precepts was just that: “only in appearance.”⁸¹⁸

The “inconsistency... noted between [subjects’] morality and their actions” was therefore less the fault of individuals than institutions which demanded public affirmation of opinions private by nature.⁸¹⁹ As Rousseau countered in *Civil Religion*, only the most general tenets shared by all could serve as a basis for civil communion; individual beliefs lay beyond the jurisdiction of Church and State alike.

Reiterating this argument in his *Letter to Beaumont*, Rousseau wondered:

Why does one man have the right of inspection over another man’s belief, and why does the State have it over the belief of the Citizens? It is because it is assumed that what men believe determines their morality, and that their conduct in this life is dependent upon their ideas about the life to come. If this is not true, what difference does it make what they believe or what they pretend to believe?⁸²⁰

The answer is none, so long as citizens uphold the common duties necessary to preserve their polity’s well-being.⁸²¹ In society, “everyone has the right to find out whether another person believes himself obligated to be just, and the Sovereign has the right to examine the reasons on which each person bases this obligation.”⁸²² This standard did not, however, apply to an individual’s faith. As Rousseau emphasized, for “opinions that are not connected to morality, that do not influence actions in any

⁸¹⁸ For a discussion of the problem between appearance and reality used as a justification for Rousseau’s sense of individual innocence, see Chapter 3 above. *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.57; OC IV.973.

⁸¹⁹ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.57; OC IV.973.

⁸²⁰ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.57; OC IV.973.

⁸²¹ Locke similarly argued that a heathen who rejected “both Testaments” should not be “punished as a pernicious citizen,” because such beliefs affect neither the security of magisterial power nor “the estates of the people.” Even though he “readily grant[s] that these opinions are false and absurd,” Locke maintained that “the business of laws is not to provide for the truth of opinions, but for the safety and security of the commonwealth, and of every particular man’s goods and person.” Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, pp. 55-56.

⁸²² *Letter to Beaumont*. Beaumont CW IX.57; OC IV.973.

way, and that do not transgress Laws, each person has only his own judgment as a master on these, and no one has either right or interest in prescribing his way of thinking for others.”⁸²³

Jean-Jacques further developed this distinction between public and private faith in his *Letters Written from the Mountain*. Beginning with a tripartite division of religion into dogma, morality, and worship (“which is only ceremonial”), he split “dogma further into two parts, namely the one which in setting forth the principles of our duties serves as a foundation for morality, and the one which, purely of faith, contains only speculative dogmas.”⁸²⁴ Rousseau’s civil faith was concerned only with the former, foundational codes which define society’s moral will.

As for the part of Religion that deals with morality, that is to say justice, the public good, obedience to the natural and positive Laws, the social virtues and all the duties of man and Citizen, it is the business of government to take cognizance of them. It is on this point alone that Religion falls directly under its jurisdiction, and that it must banish not error, of which it is not the judge,⁸²⁵ but every harmful sentiment that tends to cut the social knot.

As his stance on Christianity made clear, religion takes different forms, each with its own unique function. Those that serve morality, justice, the public good and civic duty define the terms of social relations, and therefore fall under the domain of sovereign jurisdiction.

Reiterating his claim that “it is important for the State not to be without Religion... for serious reasons, upon which I have strongly insisted throughout,” Rousseau nonetheless argued that it would be better to do without “than to have a barbarous and persecuting [creed] that, tyrannizing the Laws themselves, would

⁸²³ *Letter to Beaumont*. Beaumont CW IX.57; OC IV.973.

⁸²⁴ *Letters Written From the Mountain* (First Letter). CW IX.139; OC III.694.

⁸²⁵ *Letters Written From the Mountain* (First Letter). CW IX.140; OC III.694-695.

thwart the duties of the Citizen.”⁸²⁶ In this worst of possible scenarios, a wise Legislator is left with only two options:

the first is to establish a purely civil Religion, which includes all fundamental dogmas of every good Religion, all dogmas truly useful to either a universal or a particular society... The other expedient is to leave Christianity as it is in its genuine spirit: free, disengaged from all bonds of flesh, with no other obligation than that of conscience, no other constraint in its dogmas than morals and Laws.⁸²⁷

Because “the Gospel has only one aim... to call and save all men,” and because this lesson is fundamentally removed from worldly concerns (as Jesus himself said “a thousand times”), “Christianity as it is” could not combat the tyranny of a “barbarous and persecuting” creed. Under such circumstances, Legislators had only one feasible strategy: “removing the Christian Religion from national Institutions” and instituting a Civil Religion. In so urging Rousseau claimed to “establish what is best for the human race,” a religious association distinct from (and protective of) interior faith which actively fostered civic duty.

His solution to the politico-theological problem therefore demanded sharp jurisdictional boundaries, a clear understanding of the varieties of religious practice, and a sober assessment of religion’s strengths and weaknesses when “considered in relation to society.” The only way to preserve Christianity was to keep it out of politics. This argument was consistent with the lesson (as Rousseau understood it) of Jesus, the first to completely divest religion of corporeal concerns. Furthermore, as we have also seen, Rousseau believed that “purely spiritual” faiths tended towards political apathy or (when appropriated by theocrats and papists) dogmatic intolerance, and were thus ill-suited to the specific demands of citizenship. By contrast, the only

⁸²⁶ *Letters Written From the Mountain* (First Letter). CW IX.148; OC III.705.

⁸²⁷ *Letters Written From the Mountain* (First Letter). CW IX.148; OC III.705-706.

way to protect society *and* preserve true adherence to divine order was to implement a “purely civil” faith. If Civil Religion discouraged dogmatism, cultivated civic unity, and conformed to the general will, it also upheld the sanctity of personal religious belief so necessary to keep man attuned to his divinely-scribed nature.

Rousseau’s dual commitment to religious piety and individual liberty are easy to overlook in a text which errs on the side of authoritarianism. After all, he presents exile and corporal punishment as threats necessary to protect a greater good. Yet for Rousseau, attacks upon individual faith had *always* aroused such unbending hostility. Consider these two examples of righteous indignation from earlier works, first in his August 30, 1756 *Letter to Voltaire* and then in *Julie*:

I am indignant that the faith of everyone is not in the most perfect liberty, and that man dares control the interior of consciences, where he is unable to penetrate, as if it depended on us to believe in matters where demonstration has no place.⁸²⁸

[N]o true believer can possibly practice intolerance or persecution. If I were a judge, and the law prescribed the death penalty against atheists, I would begin by having burned for atheism anyone who came to turn in someone else.⁸²⁹

To Voltaire, Rousseau forthrightly denounced those who would dare “control the interior of consciences.” And in *Julie*, he suggested that those who condemned non-believers to death were themselves more deserved of execution.

⁸²⁸ *Letter from Rousseau to Voltaire*, August 18, 1756. CW III.119; OC IV.1072.

⁸²⁹ The context of these lines is particularly revealing. A letter detailing Wolmar’s atheism notes that “he had in his whole life found no more than three Priests who believed in God.” In an author’s note, Rousseau qualifies this third-person statement: “God forbid I should approve these harsh and outrageous assertions; I merely affirm that there are people who make them and whose excess is only too often justified by the clergy of all countries and all sects.” Although, as we have seen, Rousseau himself charged ecclesiasts with irreligiosity, here he claims to want only to provide “clarity [in] my sentiment on this point”: namely, that genuine religious belief and intolerance are mutually incompatible. *Julie*. CW VI.482n; OC II.589n.

If Rousseau sustained these severe sentiments throughout his career, *On Civil Religion* nonetheless marked a turning point, a struggle to apply his convictions to practice. It was the concrete culmination of a vague idea initially conceived in 1756 as “a sort of profession of faith that the laws can impose.”⁸³⁰ Even at this nascent stage, however, Rousseau sounded obdurate. He approached the task of religious reform as though it were war, warning that “there can exist Religions which attack the foundation of society, and... it is necessary to begin by exterminating these Religions in order to assure the peace of the State.”⁸³¹ So were set the harsh tones of a battle he returned to wage in full more than six years later.

Why did Rousseau strike so violent a pose from beginning to end? In a 1755 letter to Voltaire, he made plain that sometimes “evil is such that the very causes that gave birth to it are necessary to prevent it from becoming larger. It is the sword that must be left in the wound for fear that the wounded person will die when it is removed.”⁸³² Sometimes, evil cannot be completely eradicated; and sometimes, as the *Second Discourse* and *Social Contract* argued, the very faculties which corrupt us can facilitate our salvation; sometimes, in these extreme instances, you have to fight fire with fire.

Desperate times may require desperate measures, but never apathy or resignation. This was precisely the challenge posed in *Civil Religion*. In claiming to solely represent God, clerics undermined His benevolence and misrepresented His

⁸³⁰ *Letter from Rousseau to Voltaire*, August 18, 1756. CW III.119; OC IV.1073.

⁸³¹ As in *Civil Religion*, Rousseau claimed that “intolerance [was] easily the most odious” of dogmas meriting proscription. This was because an intolerant person “imagines that one cannot be a good man without believing everything that he believes, and damns unmercifully all those who do not think like him.” This was the very critique he presented in *The Social Contract*, and a crime attributed to papists throughout his writings (specifically when denouncing Original Sin). *Letter from Rousseau to Voltaire*, August 18, 1756. CW III.119; OC IV.1073.

⁸³² *Letter from Rousseau to Voltaire*, September 10, 1755. CW III.106; OC III.226-227.

very will. Their coercive creeds crippled social unity, assailed individual liberty, and perverted His magnificent order. Rather than remain complacent, Rousseau urged readers to fight back. After all, the secular and spiritual damage wrought by papists could *only* be repaired through radical reform. Only by instituting a faith which rejected despotic dogma and expunged religious intolerance could Jean-Jacques' vision of secular and spiritual salvation achieve fruition.⁸³³

Towards this end, Rousseau made one essential demand. He asked that we keep our relationship with God to ourselves, and allow others the same freedom. Consider as evidence his response to being pressed on a theological point of contention:

after telling [an interlocutor] I do not understand it and do not care about understanding it, I would ask him as decently as I could to mind his own business, and if he persisted, I would leave him there.

That is the only principle on which something stable and equitable can be established about disputes of Religion. Lacking that, everyone establishes on his own part what is in question, there will never be agreement on anything, people will never in their lives understand one another, and Religion, which ought to make men happy, will always cause their greatest ills.⁸³⁴

In short, *mind your own business*. This was less a suggestion than an imperative. Religion “ought to make men happy” because it affirmed our connection to God and His benevolent order. Doctrinal differences subverted this relationship, serving only to enflame corporeal divisions. Since men could never settle such “disputes,” they must agree to not agree. This was wholly possible because, as Rousseau argued,

⁸³³ If Civil Religion's more reactionary proposals reflect this adamant condition, Rousseau's model also drew upon the dictate of his Golden Rule, to do “*what is good... with the least possible harm to others.*” *Second Discourse*. CW III.37-38; OC III.156.

⁸³⁴ *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.57; OC IV.973.

every believer regardless of creed shared certain fundamental tenets.⁸³⁵ And only these most general of beliefs could foster an inclusive, unifying, truly *civil* morality grounded in religious piety.

Perhaps *On Civil Religion* failed to strike the right balance. Perhaps it succumbed too heavily to its author's fear of dogmatism and preoccupation with social order. Or perhaps it was subverted by conflicting loyalties, by the "strange confusion of the profane and the sacred" Robert Derathé identified in its manifold claims.⁸³⁶ Rousseau accepted man's needs as creations of God dependent upon divine guidance, and denatured creatures dependent upon legitimate institutions. He examined religion as a source of moral virtue, and religious associations as a catalyst for human oppression. He identified the necessity of social harmony and the threats to this order. And he concluded that the only way to truly serve mankind—to satisfy our equally compelling spiritual and secular needs—was to draw from religion only those principles we knew were true (no matter our creed), while forging the legitimized chains necessary to preserve our freedom. As with the treatise on *Poland*, *Civil Religion* sincerely struggled to implement a social contract under less-than-ideal circumstances.

In the final analysis, Rousseau refused to abandon his commitment to either spiritual or corporeal improvement because he believed they were so deeply interrelated. Society needed social order, just as individuals needed faith. After all,

⁸³⁵ In this, Rousseau's stance mirrors the Vicar's deistic anti-sectarianism. This shared beliefs also serve as *Civil Religion*'s four "positive" dogmas.

⁸³⁶ Derathé interpreted this "confusion" as evidence of escapism, arguing that Rousseau had vainly attempted to tidy up the paradoxes and dualisms so characteristic of his works. Judith Shklar had levied a similar charge against Rousseau in *Men and Citizens*. OC III.1505. For a rebuttal to Shklar's argument, see Chapter Two above.

human beings were *both* creations of God and denatured individuals. We were blessed with conscience *and* free will, natural goodness *and* the ability to err. God gave us perfectibility, the faculty that enabled our history of decline *and* allowed us the means of self-redemption. Civil Religion reflects this tense dialectic: it is both pious and profane, pessimistic and idealistic, civil and intolerant, civic-minded and individualistic, reasoned and emotive, historically-grounded and forward-thinking. In striking so many dissonant chords it grabs our attention, prodding us to accept religion and man *as they are*, and envision the relationship between religion and politics *as it should be*.

Chapter 6: The Road to Vincennes

I do not mean... that one can be virtuous without Religion; I held this erroneous opinion for a long time, but now I am only too disabused.

—Rousseau, *Letter to d'Alembert*⁸³⁷

I have suffered too much in this life not to expect another one. All the subtleties of Metaphysics will not make me doubt for a moment the immortality of the soul, and a beneficent Providence. I feel it, I believe it, I wish it, I hope it, I shall defend it until my last breath; and it will be, of all the controversies that I shall have sustained, the only one where my interest will not be forgotten.

—Rousseau, *Letter to Voltaire*⁸³⁸

Taking organized religion as it was, Rousseau imagined a civil faith as it should be: serving both God and man, facilitating moral virtue and political prosperity, and occluding the violent intolerance characteristic of dogmatic sectarianism. His prescription was in part reactionary, a positive alternative to the divisive creed of Roman Catholicism. Instilling fear of a rancorous God amongst subjects, the “religion of the priests” partitioned humankind into two mutually antagonistic camps: those who either conformed to or rejected Catholic tenets. The

⁸³⁷ Although Rousseau insists that one cannot “be virtuous without religion,” he adds a significant qualifier: “a Believer can sometimes, from motives of purely social virtue, abstain from certain actions, indifferent in themselves and which do not immediately involve the conscience, such as going to the theater in a place where it is not good to tolerate it.” Notably, a secular sense of “social virtue” can serve a religious moral function. Without debasing the moral necessity of religion, he defers to a pragmatic position: in his example, both the religious and socially virtuous individual would shun a Genevan theater. The end result (abstinence) is more significant than the source of guidance. This position is wholly consistent with Rousseau’s broader vision of political reform, one which employs social or artificial remedies to cultivate virtue in a denatured society. In addition, this argument suggests a mutually beneficial relationship between spiritual and secular morality, one in which a social remedy mimics the benefits of religious piety. *Letter to d'Alembert*. CW X.322n; OC V.89n. Readers should also compare this to Rousseau’s claim, ten years later, that “[t]o root out all belief in God from the heart of man is to destroy all virtue there.” *Letter to Franquières*. CW VIII.266-167; OC IV.1142.

⁸³⁸ *Letter to Voltaire*, August 18, 1756. CW III.121; OC IV.1075.

former were deemed eligible for divine redemption, while the latter were condemned as heathens and sentenced to an eternity of damnation.⁸³⁹

As Rousseau noted, this brash verdict followed an equally egregious assumption. Papal authorities believed themselves to be the sole mediators and arbiters of a divine will that was, in fact, ultimately incomprehensible to the human mind. And in claiming to exclusively represent the Author of all things, clerics actually disserved their presumed Creator and His creations alike. Perpetuating dogmatic myths of a sinful species and punitive deity, they cast a dark shadow over the true beauty, wisdom and order characteristic of our divinely-scribed world. Furthermore, in damning human ontology as fatally flawed, Roman Catholicism decreed that remission (and, hence, redemption) was possible only through strict adherence to its tenets. Rousseau sharply disagreed, dismissing orthodox positions on Original Sin, miracles, and revelation, while soundly rejecting the Church's assertion that it alone possessed the authority to mete out man's salvation.

Virulent anti-clericalism notwithstanding, Jean-Jacques was hardly irreligious. Rather, he argued that religion and faith were keystones of a virtuous polity. The problem was simply that Catholicism⁸⁴⁰ did not cultivate the values (tolerance, liberty, and equality under the law) essential to a vibrant democratic culture's welfare. In remedy, Rousseau offered a bold alternative: a Civil Religion that both enriched corporeal life and upheld divine order.

⁸³⁹ Readers should also note the socially divisive consequences of this verdict. As Maurice Cranston describes, Rousseau's was "an age when nonconformity was everywhere severely penalized." This phenomenon was particularly acute in sectarian matters, as the infamous Calas affair and routine persecution of non-Catholics illustrates. Cranston, *The Noble Savage*, p. 1.

⁸⁴⁰ As we saw in Chapter 5, Catholicism epitomized the social and political failings that (in *On Civil Religion*) he attributed to all dogmatic and theocratic creeds.

The ambitiousness of his solution cannot be understated. Rousseau did not merely dismiss the merits of papism; he attempted to found a new religion entirely, a “purely civil” faith that served God and man alike. Civil Religion certainly adhered to foundational Christian beliefs (in an omnipotent Creator, the existence of an afterlife, and a divine moral code) and drew upon a Protestant model of individual worship.⁸⁴¹ Yet it was also deeply secular, designed in conformity with the requisites of a legitimate polity established in *The Social Contract*. Where Catholicism molded subjects who cowered before God and monarch alike, Rousseau claimed that his civic creed cultivated autonomous, pious citizens. Where clerics damned mankind as Adam’s infected progeny, the Genevan dared to suggest that, as naturally innocent creations, salvation was possible in this world *and* the next.

From whence did he summon the nerve to voice such radical beliefs? We might here recall that Rousseau once described Jesus and Socrates as his spiritual and moral forebears.⁸⁴² Like these storied figures, he acted as a man possessed by a higher calling. Jean-Jacques may have lacked the self-possession of Socrates and the sheer fearlessness of Jesus. But, as his motto reminds us, he shared their commitment to reveal the truth no matter the cost. Following divinely-instilled missions, Jesus and Socrates⁸⁴³ sacrificed individual welfare to point their slumbering peers towards

⁸⁴¹ According to Rousseau, “the two fundamental points of the Reform... [were] to acknowledge the Bible as rule of one’s belief, and not to admit any other interpreter of the meaning of the Bible than oneself.” This was because Reformers had established “the individual mind... as the sole interpreter of Scripture” while rejecting “the authority of the Church.” *Letters Written From the Mountain: Second Letter*. CW IX.154; OC III.712-713.

⁸⁴² See: *Letter to Beaumont* (Fragment 5). CW IX.89; OC IV.1016.

⁸⁴³ As Socrates asserted, “I want you to think of my adventures as a sort of pilgrimage undertaken to establish the truth of the oracle.” The reference is to the Delphic oracle, to whose divine injunction Socrates attributed his calling as a gadfly. See: *The Apology*, 20D-22A in Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*, pp. 49-51. What Socrates considered divine inspiration (the priestess’ pronouncements),

redemption amidst a world beset by decay. Rousseau was similarly consumed, drawing upon faith in divine beneficence and human potential to dream of—and struggle to realize—a better future for all.

The Genevan attributed his intense convictions to a life-changing event. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, he was struck by a supernatural epiphany that occurred *en route* to Vincennes.⁸⁴⁴ Rousseau described his conversion as the epicenter of his career, the catalyst to his every *oeuvre*. A moment of profound clarity and physical exhaustion, transcendent bliss and tearful collapse, Rousseau's transformation was also, quite notably, Christian in form and Pagan in content. Seemingly touched by the hand of God, he was reborn as a proselyte⁸⁴⁵ for human glory and corporeal redemption: his spiritual awakening crystallized as a mandate of secular reform. A stunning amalgam of the themes with which we have grappled throughout, the road on which Jean-Jacques began life anew marks a particularly fitting point for our own study to conclude.

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modern science suggests were in fact ethylene-induced hallucinations. See: William J. Broad, "For Delphic Oracle, Fumes and Visions," *The New York Times*, March 19, 2002.

⁸⁴⁴ Rousseau was visiting Diderot, who had been imprisoned in the dungeons of Vincennes on July 24, 1749 for anti-Catholic writings, and had recently been moved to a *château* where he was permitted to receive visitors. For a summary of the political climate that led to Diderot's arrest—specifically, of the rise in censorship following the Austrian Succession—see: Cranston, *Jean-Jacques: The Early Life and Work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1712-1754*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 226-227.

⁸⁴⁵ In *The Confessions*, Rousseau reveals that his uncle was a preacher, and that he had considered a career as a minister (which he forewent due to financial considerations): "I preferred to be a minister [to a watchmaker or a lawyer], for I found it very fine to preach. But the small income from my mother's property which was to be divided between my brother and myself was not enough for furthering my studies." CW V.21; OC I.25.

Rousseau changed creeds twice in his life, from Protestantism to Catholicism and back to Protestantism. If the first⁸⁴⁶ was juvenile, a trite decision he made as a teenage runaway charmed by a Savoyard priest over dinner and fine Frangi wine, the second⁸⁴⁷ was commonly viewed as a matter of expediency “to recover his rights and privileges as a citizen of Geneva.”⁸⁴⁸ No matter the circumstances, neither of these formal conversions suggest a calling in the Biblical sense of the term.⁸⁴⁹ Fittingly enough for our paradoxical author, Rousseau’s most Christian conversion—in form if not content—was to political philosophy.

Jean-Jacques’ first and most elaborate description of this life-changing event appeared in a series of 1762⁸⁵⁰ correspondences to the censor Malesherbes.⁸⁵¹ He

⁸⁴⁶ In his sixteenth year, Rousseau missed his city’s curfew, and found himself locked out of Geneva’s gates. In reaction, he fled, making his way to Savoy. He there met Benoit de Pontverre, the first of two figures he credits as inspiration for his fictional Savoyard Vicar. Pontverre took the wayward lad into his home, and urged him to renounce his native Protestantism for Catholicism. As Rousseau writes, “I did not dream of changing religion; and very far from growing accustomed so quickly to that idea, I envisaged it only with a horror that ought to have kept it away from me for a long time; I only wanted not to anger these people who were cajoling me with that intention; I wanted to cultivate their benevolence and to leave them the hope of success by appearing less well armed than I was in fact.” Passivity and purported politeness aside, he did in fact convert, and soon departed to Annency where he met the woman entrusted with his care—Louise Eleonor de Warens. *The Confessions*. CW V.39; OC I.46–47.

⁸⁴⁷ As Rousseau wrote after his Protestant conversion of 1754, “I am attached in good faith to that true and holy Religion, and I shall be until my last breath. I wish always to be united to that church in public as I am in the depths of my heart, and however consoling it will be for me personally to participate in the communion of believers, I desire it, I assure you, more for the edification of those believers and for the honour of the Church than for my own advantage, for it would not be right for people to think that a man of good faith who reasons cannot be a member of Jesus Christ.” From: CC XII.2108, as translated in Cranston, *The Solitary Self*, p. 32. For the displeasure this declaration elicited amongst the Parisian *philosophes* (particularly d’Alembert), see p. 33.

⁸⁴⁸ Despite this cynical view held even amongst his friends, Rousseau insisted that his Protestant faith was sincere and passionate. In support, Cranston argues that Jean-Jacques’ conversion back to Protestantism was not simply guided by practical or strategic concerns, and in fact was wholly consistent with Jean-Jacques’ increasing commitment to “lead a thoroughly virtuous life.” As Cranston continues, “Rousseau saw himself as having become a true believer in the Reformed religion, at least as he understood it.” Cranston, *The Noble Savage*, p. 1.

⁸⁴⁹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a Biblical calling as either a “summons, invitation, or impulse of God to salvation or to his service,” or “the inward feeling or conviction of a divine call.”

⁸⁵⁰ Rousseau wrote four letters in this series to Malesherbes, dating from January 4 to January 28, 1762. See: CW V.572–583; OC I.1130–1147.

⁸⁵¹ As John M. S. Allison describes, Malesherbe’s relationship to Rousseau was “friendly but always frank.” Their interactions nonetheless were strained following the publication of *Emile* and *The Social*

began these *Letters* much as he would his later *Confessions*: with a bold claim that they contained “the true picture of my character and the true motives for all my behavior.”⁸⁵² The “true picture” depicted Rousseau as a defeated, disillusioned wanderer who possessed a “natural love of solitude which has done nothing but increase in proportion as I have gotten to know men better.”⁸⁵³ He attributed this propensity to both temperament and circumstance: men had caused him to “take fright” and withdraw, while his nature predisposed him to passivity. “The active life has nothing that tempts me,” he asserted. “I would a hundred times rather consent to never doing anything than to doing something in spite of myself; and I have thought a hundred times that I would not have lived too unhappily at the Bastille, since I would not be restricted to anything at all except to staying there.”⁸⁵⁴

This manifesto of inactivity was nonetheless incomplete, for Rousseau also admitted to harboring ambition as a youth.⁸⁵⁵ He attributed his taste for achievement to the Pagan writings of Plutarch, heroic tales which he encountered at age six and memorized by age eight.⁸⁵⁶ These epic stories moved his heart and (much as the

Contract. In a letter to Rousseau dated November 13, 1762, Malesherbes praised “that spirit of truth so strong, courageous, and passionately virtuous which pervades all your writing,” but regretted that he “found myself at odds... in regard to the most important principles which you have discussed in your more recent works.” See: Allison, *Lamoignon de Malesherbes: Defender and Reformer of the French Monarchy, 1721-1794*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938), p. 32.

⁸⁵² *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V.572; OC I.1130.

⁸⁵³ According to Rousseau, the cause of his reclusiveness “is nothing other than that indomitable spirit of freedom which... comes to me less from pride than from laziness; but this laziness is unbelievable; everything makes it take fright; the slightest duties of civil life are unbearable to it.” *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V.572-573; OC I.1131-1132.

⁸⁵⁴ *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V.573; OC I.1132.

⁸⁵⁵ “Nevertheless,” Rousseau confides, “in my youth I made several efforts to succeed.” *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V.573; OC I.1132-1133.

⁸⁵⁶ From these readings, Rousseau writes, “was formed in my heart that heroic and romantic taste which has done nothing but increase up to the present, and which ended by disgusting me with everything.” *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V.574; OC I.1134.

Bible had affected Augustine)⁸⁵⁷ caused him to “shed buckets of tears.”⁸⁵⁸ They also caused him significant grief, planting dreams of glory that were soon “soured by the injustices I had suffered, and by those I had been the witness of.”⁸⁵⁹

At the time of his writing, only two things assuaged Rousseau’s regret: daydreams and faith. Dismayed with the “society of men,” he retreated (as in the *Reveries*) into his “imagination which charmed me all the more since I could cultivate it without effort, without risk, and always find it reliable and as I needed it to be.”⁸⁶⁰ And (as in *The Confessions*) he insisted that the Lord would ultimately affirm his goodness: “I do not fear at all being seen as I am. I know my great flaws, and I feel all my vices keenly. With all that I will die full of hope in the Supreme God, and very persuaded that of all the men I have known in my life, none was better than I.”⁸⁶¹

These therapeutic asides notwithstanding, Rousseau struggled mightily. “Forty years of my life [passed] this way,” he bemoaned.⁸⁶² “[D]issatisfied with myself and with others, I fruitlessly sought to break the bonds that were keeping me attached to that society which I esteemed so little, and which chained me to occupations that were least to my taste through needs that I considered to be those of nature and which were only those of opinion.”⁸⁶³ In short, he would have been far happier left to his own devices and free to pursue an unfettered existence. The bonds that “attached” him to society—social relations generally, and employment

⁸⁵⁷ See: Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII.xii.29, pp. 152-153.

⁸⁵⁸ *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V.574; OC I.1134.

⁸⁵⁹ *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V.575; OC I.1134.

⁸⁶⁰ *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V.575; OC I.1135.

⁸⁶¹ *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V.574; OC I.1133. Readers should compare this passage with: *The Confessions*. CW V.5; OC I.5.

⁸⁶² In fact, only thirty-seven years of Rousseau’s life had passed. His epiphany on the road to Vincennes occurred in October of 1749. His first visit to Diderot was in August of the same year. Trousson and Eigeldinger, *Rousseau au jour le jour*, p. 53.

⁸⁶³ *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V.575; OC I.1135.

specifically—nonetheless proved difficult to break. Rousseau was lost in the world, disgusted with denatured society yet unsure of how to liberate himself, when a stroke of fate delivered him from his monotonous stalemate: “Suddenly a fortunate chance happened to enlighten me about what I had to do for myself, and to think about my fellows about whom my heart was ceaselessly in contradiction with my mind, and whom I still felt myself brought to love along with so many reasons to hate them.”⁸⁶⁴

This “singularly epoch-making moment in my life” occurred on the road to Vincennes.⁸⁶⁵ The catalyst to his revelation was a small advertisement in *le Mercure de France* for the Dijon Academy’s essay contest. Although Rousseau later responded to the question posed (*has the restoration of the sciences and arts tended to purify morals?*)⁸⁶⁶ with his prize-winning *First Discourse*, its reading produced a far more immediate effect.

If anything has ever resembled a sudden inspiration, it is the motion that was caused in me by that reading; suddenly I felt my mind dazzled by a thousand lights; crowds of lively ideas presented themselves at the same time with a strength and a confusion that threw me into an inexpressible perturbation; I feel my head seized by a dizziness similar to drunkenness. A violent palpitation oppresses me, makes me sick to my stomach; not being able to breath any more while walking, I let myself fall under one of the trees of the avenue, and I pass a half-hour there in such an agitation that when I got up again I noticed the whole front of my coat soaked with my tears without having felt that I shed them.⁸⁶⁷

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “inspiration” as the “special immediate action or influence of the Spirit of God (or of some divinity or supernatural being) upon the

⁸⁶⁴ The passivity of Rousseau’s language is noteworthy. While he was paralyzed (by a strong ambivalence towards his “fellows”), chance intruded “to enlighten me about what I had to do for myself.” *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V.575; OC I.1135.

⁸⁶⁵ *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V.575; OC I.1135.

⁸⁶⁶ *First Discourse*. CW II.1; OC III.1. The announcement appeared in the October, 1749 edition of *le Mercure de France*. OC III.1237.

⁸⁶⁷ *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V.575; OC I.1134.

human mind or soul.”⁸⁶⁸ Rousseau’s “sudden inspiration” bore precisely these marks of divine intervention. His eyes “dazzled by a thousand lights,” his mind crowded by a host of “lively ideas,” his head “seized” in a dizzying state, a “violent” force overwhelmed him. Nauseous, overcome, and robbed of breath, he collapsed in a puddle of his own tears.

Rousseau was certainly not the first to be floored by a supernatural revelation. As Augustine’s *Confessions* detail, a similarly agonizing state of conflict preceded the Saint’s conversion to Christianity. His soul became a battlefield “between different wills” characterized by their “mutual incompatibility.”⁸⁶⁹ He was “torn apart in a painful condition,” bound by the chains of earthly desires and initially unable to make a whole-hearted leap of faith to Christ.⁸⁷⁰ “Twisting and turning in my chain”—namely, attachment to physical desire—“until it would break completely,” Augustine confided that “the nearer approached the moment of time when I would become different [converted] the greater the horror of it struck me.”⁸⁷¹ Paralyzed in a “state of suspense,” caught between deeply conflicting urges (earthly habit and divine inspiration), his “painful” transformation finally coalesced in a moment of clarity: wholly dedicating himself to God, he concluded that life was a trial “to be endured, not loved.”⁸⁷²

⁸⁶⁸ More specifically, the term “inspiration” is used to describe “that divine influence under which the books of Scripture are held to have been written.”

⁸⁶⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, pp. 146 & 150.

⁸⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁸⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 150-151.

⁸⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 202.

Likewise, Rousseau's illumination physically overpowered him, imbued him with faith, and culminated in revelation.⁸⁷³ However, these similarities notwithstanding, one significant distinction separates the two conversions: Augustine's followed a protracted, self-conscious struggle to convert⁸⁷⁴ whereas Rousseau was quite literally struck out of the blue. As the *Letters to Malesherbes* make clear, he had dreamt far more of retreat (from society) than (individual) reform. Only a series of fortuitous coincidences led him to Vincennes with *le Mercure* in hand, where he read a brief question from Dijon that abruptly, intensely, and without rational explanation,⁸⁷⁵ coalesced all the contradictory thoughts in his brain and sent him reeling to the ground.

Rousseau provides little evidence that he had sought, much less anticipated, such a dramatic transformation. Yet unlike his formal conversions to Catholicism and Protestantism, this moment marked a deep and permanent change. The sense of duty that he actively eschewed for so long had suddenly become manifest. Touched by otherworldly inspiration, Rousseau was reborn as a proselyte compelled to convey that single brief illumination. He had finally found his calling or, more precisely, his calling had finally found him.

⁸⁷³ In addition, the fortuitous appearance of a text (Athanasius' *The Life of Antony* and *le Mercure de France*) provided the catalyst for the conversions of both Augustine and Rousseau.

⁸⁷⁴ As Augustine writes, "I supposed that the reason for my postponing 'from day to day' the moment when I would despise worldly ambition and follow you was that I had not seen any certainty by which to direct my course." It was only after encountering the story of Saint Antony's life that Augustine recognized "the day had now come when I stood naked to myself, and my conscience complained against me," pushing him to wholly embrace God. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁸⁷⁵ This absence of reasoning further distinguishes the conversions of Rousseau and Augustine. The Saint's leap of faith to God was predicated upon a sophisticated metaphysical analysis of the dangers of a divided soul, an affliction whose only possible, rational cure was the whole-hearted embrace of God. See: Augustine, *Confessions*, pp. 137-141. For Augustine's comparably reasoned argument on time, see: 221-245.

In this regard, Rousseau's epiphany more closely resembles Saint Paul's storied conversion on the road to Damascus. Paul was a Roman citizen and Hellenized Jew, "a Hebrew born of Hebrews" in approximately 10 AD.⁸⁷⁶ In 36 AD he was sent north by the high priest of Jerusalem to arrest the followers of Jesus and destroy their burgeoning heresy. As *Acts 9* describes, Paul was initially no Saint: "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord," he left in active pursuit of "any belonging to the Way, men or women, [so] he might bring them bound to Jerusalem."⁸⁷⁷ While crossing the Jordan Valley en route to Damascus, he was struck by a vision that forever transformed him. Outside the city's borders, "suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'"⁸⁷⁸ Overwhelmed by the voice of God, Paul collapsed. When he arose "and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing."⁸⁷⁹ The would-be scourge of Christianity was rendered helpless, led to Damascus by his company.

As the Bible tells, "for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank."⁸⁸⁰ On the final day Paul exhibited the first sign of faith (prayer) and was subsequently healed by the Christian disciple Ananias. Ananias had already "heard from many about this man [Paul], how much evil he has done to thy saints at Jerusalem" acting under the "authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon thy name."⁸⁸¹ He relayed this to God in a vision, yet the Lord was undeterred: "Go

⁸⁷⁶ Paul was born in Tarsus, a provincial capital of the Roman Empire.

⁸⁷⁷ *Acts* 9:1-2.

⁸⁷⁸ *Acts* 9:3-4.

⁸⁷⁹ *Acts* 9:8.

⁸⁸⁰ *Acts* 9:9.

⁸⁸¹ *Acts* 9:13-14.

[to cure him], for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”⁸⁸²

It was under these conditions—a solemn mixture of divine mercy and imposed suffering—that Ananias visited Paul with the gift of redemption. After receiving the disciple’s touch, scales fell from Paul’s eyes, his blindness was cured, and he rose to be baptized, dedicating his life to spreading the gospel that Jesus was the son of God. As Ronald Brownrigg observes, “Paul’s conversion was remarkable for the *total* reversal that it involved in his thinking, and the complete redirection of his whole life.”⁸⁸³ He was reborn as an Apostle in the very act of persecuting those to whom he was now entrusted to serve.

Parallels between the conversions of Paul and Rousseau range from the superficial (both were on a road) to the substantive. In each, supernatural epiphany inspired radical redirection in the form of an individual calling. For both men, faith was the gift bestowed upon them after physical trials, and the catalyst to their redemption. Furthermore, neither appeared to have much *choice* in the matter; illumination was the result of divine intervention rather than an autonomous act of will.⁸⁸⁴ And finally, both felt compelled to spread their newfound truths no matter the consequences.⁸⁸⁵

⁸⁸² Acts 9:15-16.

⁸⁸³ Ronald Brownrigg, *Who’s Who in the New Testament*. (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 193.

⁸⁸⁴ Readers should recall that passivity—specifically, abandoning oneself to God—is a definitive element of Christian conversion. For the prominence of passivity within Rousseau’s life and works, readers should consult Starobinski’s *Transparency and Obstruction*.

⁸⁸⁵ Paul enraged his former allies in preaching Christianity, just as Rousseau alienated the *philosophes* in praising religiosity. See, for example, Voltaire’s quip (following the *Letter to d’Alembert*) that Rousseau had perhaps “become a priest of the Church” in Besterman, *Voltaire’s Correspondence*. XIX.D7864.

This latter point proved particularly significant to Rousseau's life. As with Paul on the road to Damascus, he emerged from the road to Vincennes determined to share his revelation. As he confides,

if I had ever been able to write a quarter of what I saw and felt under that tree, how clearly I would have made all the contradictions of the social system seem, with what simplicity I would have demonstrated that *man* is naturally good and that it is from these institutions alone that *men* become wicked. Everything that I was able to retain of these crowds of great truths which illuminated me under that tree in a quarter of an hour has been weakly scattered about in my three principal writings.⁸⁸⁶

Here, finally, is the source of Rousseau's manifold claims of consistency and coherence. Every discourse, treatise, novel and letter to escape his pen was an attempt to articulate these compelling "truths." More specifically, the most powerful truth of all—the source of human suffering—had suddenly become clear: man was "naturally good," a victim of society's perverting influence. Buoyed by its simplicity, Jean-Jacques dedicated his remaining years to articulating this illumination, struggling to convince his peers that they should heed his insights and reform their religious, social and political institutions accordingly.

"That is how when I was thinking about it least," Rousseau confides, "I became an author almost in spite of myself."⁸⁸⁷ After all, his epiphany offered rapturous clarity, but it also pressed him to pursue a life not of his making. From that point forward Jean-Jacques "wanted to be consistent and shake the heavy yoke of opinion from my shoulders once and for all" by relating his message of natural

⁸⁸⁶ Rousseau is here referring to the two *Discourses* and *Emile*, works which "are inseparable and together form the same whole." *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V.575; OC I.1135-1136. (My emphasis, to again underscore the distinction between *man* and *men* central to Rousseau's concept of innocence.)

⁸⁸⁷ Although Rousseau cherishes freedom and liberty, he implies that he is prone to inactivity in the absence of exogenous pressure. In addition, he confides that "I have always written in a cowardly manner and badly when I was not strongly persuaded." *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V.575-576; OC I.1136.

innocence and artificial corruption.⁸⁸⁸ Yet this duty was, at best, a mixed blessing.⁸⁸⁹ The individual sacrifice required to spread these contentious truths caused him significant regret, and left him once again longing for solitude. Convinced that “great tests” and “experience” demonstrated “the state in which I have put myself⁸⁹⁰ is the only one in which man can live as good and happy, since it is the most independent of all, and the only one in which one never finds oneself in the necessity of harming someone else for one’s own advantage,” he still dreamt of an “isolated and independent” life free of social constraints.⁸⁹¹

When the real world failed him, Rousseau did what devout Christians often do: he looked beyond the material world. He stole moments of ecstasy in fits of reverie. Only then could he enjoy “the whole universe, everything that is, everything that can be, everything that is beautiful in the perceptible world, and that is imaginable in the intellectual world.”⁸⁹² Retreating within his imagination, Rousseau took delight in a rapturous embrace of *everything*, in communion with a magnificent divine order free of society’s flaws. Although this “golden age” crafted in his mind left him “tender to the point of tears,” he was still saddened by “the nothingness of my chimeras” and, more deeply, the “inexplicable void in myself that nothing could

⁸⁸⁸ *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V.576; OC I.1136.

⁸⁸⁹ As Rousseau laments, soon after his revelation Diderot “exhorted me to give vent to my ideas and to compete for the prize. I did so, and from that instant I was lost. All the rest of my life and misfortunes was the inevitable effect of that instant aberration.” Jean-Jacques’ complaint (and deflection of accountability) is, however, somewhat misleading. It was the force and clarity of his illumination—not the cajoling of his friend—that, by his own description, compelled him to embark on his career as an author and public intellectual. *The Confessions*. CW V.294-295; OC I.351.

⁸⁹⁰ Readers should note that Rousseau’s language here takes the possessive form (“the state in which I have put myself”), implying an autonomy at odds with his more frequent descriptions of duty as an exogenously-imposed burden.

⁸⁹¹ *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V.576; OC I.1137.

⁸⁹² *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V.577; OC I.1138-1139.

fill; a certain yearning of the heart toward another sort of enjoyment the idea of which I did not have and the need for which I felt nonetheless.”⁸⁹³

In seeking to fill this void Rousseau moved closer to God.

Soon I raised my ideas from the surface of the earth to all the beings of nature, to the universal system of things, to the incomprehensible being who embraces everything. Then with my mind lost in that immensity, I did not think, I did not reason, I did not philosophize; with a sort of sensual pleasure I felt myself weighed down with the weight of that universe, with rapture I abandoned myself to the confusion of these great ideas, I loved to lose myself in imagination in space; confined within the limits of beings my heart found itself too constrained, I was smothered in the universe, I would have wanted to throw myself into the infinite. I believe that if I had unveiled all the mysteries of nature, I would have felt myself to be in a less delightful situation than that stupefying ecstasy to which my mind abandoned itself without reserve, and which sometimes made me cry out in the agitation of my raptures, “Oh great being! Oh great being,” without being able to say or think anything more.⁸⁹⁴

As in the later *Reveries*, Rousseau discovered “continuous delirium” in total and utter abandonment: “abandoning myself to the impression of the objects but without thinking, without imagining, without doing anything else but feeling the calm and the happiness of my situation.”⁸⁹⁵ Raising himself to “the incomprehensible being who embraces everything,” he savored the experience of floating amidst an unfathomable divine order while losing his faculties of speech and reasoning. As he admits, the all-too-human limitations of his mind only enhanced his sense of thrill: had he “unveiled all the mysteries of nature,” he would not have achieved the “stupefying ecstasy” borne of abandonment “without reserve.”

These moments of spiritual bliss were nonetheless fleeting. Rousseau’s rapture could not quell his real-world misgivings; they rather made him long for a

⁸⁹³ *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V.578-579; OC I.1140.

⁸⁹⁴ *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V. 579; OC I.1141.

⁸⁹⁵ *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V. 579; OC I.1141.

more immediate salvation. “[T]he trial I have made of these sweet enjoyments no longer serves for anything but making me wait with less fright for the moment of tasting them without distraction,” he lamented.⁸⁹⁶ Compelled to serve the society of men, Rousseau increasingly dreamt of an afterlife when, freed from the chains of society, he might finally delight in the heavens.

Still, if Jean-Jacques’ faith in a beneficent Creator drew him closer to God it also ushered his involvement in the world of men. After all, the means (and correlative obligation) to enact corporeal salvation suddenly became clear on the road to Vincennes. This combination of insight and prerogative reunited our self-described misanthrope with a world he was now determined to change. Indeed, Rousseau confides, on that day “I saw another universe and I became another man.” More than simply affirm the existence of a divine order, his illumination gave him new *life*, one defined by faith in humankind’s potential for virtuous redemption, and the duty to encourage this promise in practice. The society of men might never exude divine calm, but man *could* struggle to legitimize our interdependent chains, to reawaken our conscience, hone our judgment, shun divisive, oppressive opinion and align (as closely as possible) our associations with God’s harmonious order.⁸⁹⁷

To save ourselves we might—indeed *must*—follow our Creator’s lead. After Vincennes, Rousseau felt compelled to teach this lesson by example, to present himself as a natural, uncorrupted man, a beacon of hope in a denatured world.⁸⁹⁸ His

⁸⁹⁶ *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V. 580; OC I.1142.

⁸⁹⁷ Rousseau’s argument that man should embrace divine order (even though we can never replicate it in society) parallels his claim that we should evoke natural goodness as a basis for reform (even though we cannot return to our natural state). See: *Letter from Rousseau to Voltaire*, September 10, 1755. CW III.105; OC III.226.

⁸⁹⁸ Although Rousseau was deeply discomforted by his newfound role, he struggled onwards. He attributed his sense of duty to his secular attachments. “I have a very loving heart,” he confided. “I

illumination lighted the path to future redemption, one guided by a clear conviction that humankind had disserved its God-given potential. But divine inspiration also instilled within him a broad sense of civic duty, a desire to correct society's failings for the good of his species. It was thus on the road to Vincennes that Rousseau the pious (felled by a revelation) and Rousseau the profane (champion of secular welfare) became one. The dialectic between secular and spiritual themes that mingles so awkwardly throughout his works was, during his shining epiphany, made painfully, blissfully, harmoniously clear to him. It was that unprecedented moment of coherence that Rousseau spent his remaining years struggling to relate, a flash of divine inspiration that pressed him into corporeal service.

* * * * *

Following Vincennes, religious conviction imbued Rousseau with hope for his species and a passion to better his world. Still, in *others* the very same sentiment gave him serious pause. Religion may have been necessary, both to his own work and the prosperity of his species, but religious practice often undermined the requisites of civic virtue. Rather than encourage civil harmony, fanatical creeds bred divisiveness and intolerance. Men were beholden to a single deity and shared a common welfare, yet dogmatists obscured this truth by imposing artificial sectarian differences. Far from justifying the need to reconcile religious and political

love men too much... I love them all, and it is because I love them that I hate injustice; it is because I love them that I flee them, I suffer less from their evils when I do not see them." *Letters to Malesherbes*. CW V. 581; OC I.1144.

institutions, Rousseau's assessment implied that such a relationship was nothing short of fatal.

Machiavelli expressed a similar ambivalence in his *Discourses on Livy*. In an aptly-named chapter, *How Important It Is to Take Account of Religion, and How Italy, Lacking in Religion Thanks to the Roman Church, Has Been Ruined*, he described Catholicism as a threat to civic republicanism: "the church has kept and still keeps this land divided."⁸⁹⁹ Yet moments prior he argued that "there can be no greater indication of the ruin of a state than to see a disregard for its divine worship."⁹⁰⁰ And in the preceding section, *On the Religion of the Romans*, he insisted that "[j]ust as the observance of divine worship is the cause of the greatness of republics, so the disregard of divine worship is the cause of their ruin." Although "divine worship" was crucial to a polity's prosperity, the most powerful house of worship—the Catholic church—had "divided" Italy.

Like Rousseau in *On Civil Religion*, Machiavelli here seemed to lead readers towards conflicting conclusions. Yet if both thinkers agreed upon the virtues of religious piety *and* maintained the dangers of religious practice (in both cases, Roman Catholicism), what are we to make of religion's practical value? Does religiosity threaten—rather than cultivate—political virtue and civic republicanism? Is it more divisive than unifying? Given such compelling evidence to the contrary, do religious associations serve *any* positive function in the composition and preservation of a prosperous civil society?

⁸⁹⁹ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, I.12, p. 55.

⁹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, I.12, p. 53.

Perhaps more emphatically than Machiavelli,⁹⁰¹ Rousseau insisted that despite the crimes of clerics, religion *was* necessary to strong democratic reform. Furthermore, he claimed that *his* religious model was different from the dogmatic creeds he so loathed, because it both facilitated civic virtue and safeguarded citizens against sectarianism's dangers. Simply put, where Catholicism failed so miserably—where it divided and conquered rather than united and supported—his Civil Religion would prosper. Yet what made Rousseau's creed any different? Given the historical failings of formal religions, why was *his* compatible with civic republicanism? Conversely, if Rousseau was truly reborn following his conversion on the road to Vincennes, why was he concerned at all? Why did he not simply abandon himself to the overwhelming pleasure of reverie? Why not take solace in a dream of divine redemption, while letting the world stay its own self destructive course?

In the end, Rousseau was unable to abandon his faith in either man or God; the failings of dogmatic associations only pressed him to present an alternative, an inclusive model of religious practice that adhered to both core Christian beliefs and civic standards of tolerance and equality under law. In so doing, Civil Religion affirmed what Rousseau had argued elsewhere, both before and after *The Social Contract*: namely, that a truly civic religion engendered democratic virtue. As he eulogized in *To the Republic of Geneva*, the prefatory dedication to the *Second Discourse*, his birthplace was such an “edifying example of... a perfect union between a Society of Theologians and of Men of Letters.”⁹⁰² He attributed the city's

⁹⁰¹ Although Machiavelli's *Discourses* lauded religion's role in facilitating civic republican virtue, many read his *Prince* quite differently: as a cynical *realpolitik* manifesto in which successful leadership requires machination, self-interest and savvy, rather than humbling, unifying faith.

⁹⁰² *Second Discourse*. CW III.9-10; OC III.119.

“saintliness of morals, severity of oneself and gentleness to others” to “the spirit of Christianity” embodied by its pastors. In the *Letter to d’Alembert*, Genevan virtue was credited to a *mélange* of religious piety, patriotic love, and culturally reified morals.⁹⁰³ In *Emile*, Christianity quelled revolutions and solidified the authority of “modern governments,” while the Islamic “Turks, who have innumerable pious institutions” were deemed “hospitable from religious principle.”⁹⁰⁴ And in *Letters Written From the Mountain*, idyllic Swiss communities were characterized not only by striking landscapes, common heritage and familial arrangements, but also the fortitude born of religious practice.⁹⁰⁵ Religion offered a crucial foundation for civic prosperity because it bound us to our fellow citizens, and urged us to work together (no matter our particular differences) for the general welfare of all.

Still, Rousseau’s recourse to divine redemption—particularly in his later works—smacked of personal neediness. His religiosity increasingly bore the marks of a man obsessed with his own, rather than society’s, redemption. As the *Reveries* made plain, his time on earth was beset by turmoil and misunderstanding. When men had failed to appreciate (or even accurately grasp) his position, he found himself looking towards the heavens, insisting that God saw what his peers did not: the utility of his thought, his innocence as an author and individual, and the pious lessons he presented to a world increasingly ruled by *amour-propre* and perverse opinion. Yet ultimately, religiosity united Rousseau with his fellows as much as with God. As he admitted in a 1762 letter to the minister Frédéric-Guillaume de Montmollin,

⁹⁰³ *Letter to d’Alembert*. CW X.322; OC V.88-89.

⁹⁰⁴ *Emile*. E 313n.

⁹⁰⁵ *Letters Written From the Mountain* (Second Letter). CW IX.154-155; OC III.712. See also: *The Social Contract*. CW IV.222; OC III.468.

membership in the Christian⁹⁰⁶ community gave him unabashed joy: “It is consoling and sweet for me to be counted among its members, to participate in the public worship they offer to the divinity, and to say to myself in their midst: I am with my brothers.”⁹⁰⁷

Fellowship, communion, harmony, connectedness *in this world*: as much as anything, this was the indisputable promise of religion, to unite denatured creatures, not in some distant postmortem realm, but during *this* lifetime and on *this* earth. That is why, on no uncertain terms, religiosity was necessary to Rousseau’s thought. Only religion could serve the greatest of all political needs—cultivating civic virtue—because only religion reminded us that we were all creatures beholden to the same Creator and the same divine order, no matter our denominational, national, ethnic, and philosophical differences.

Writing about a “universal and all-pervading [divine] Spirit of Truth” in his autobiography, Gandhi argued that “a man who aspires after that cannot afford to keep out of any field of life. That is why my devotion to Truth has drawn me into the field of politics; and I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means.”⁹⁰⁸ Rousseau could not have agreed more. In the final analysis, his peculiar faith in man and God alike imbued with him the same stubborn conviction.

⁹⁰⁶ Again, we must emphasize the fact that by “Christian” Rousseau clearly means “Protestant,” and not “Catholic.” He was, he explained to Beaumont, “fortunate to be born into the most reasonable and holy Religion on earth, I remain inviolably attached to the worship of my Fathers. Like them, I take Scripture and reason for the unique rules of my belief. Like them, I challenge the authority of men and agree to submit to their formulas only to the extent I perceive their truth. Like them, I join in my heart with the true servants of Jesus Christ and the true adorers of God, to offer him the homages of his Church in the communion of the faithful.” *Letter to Beaumont*. CW IX.47; OC IV.960.

⁹⁰⁷ CC XII.2108.

⁹⁰⁸ Mohandas K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments With Truth*, Mahadev Desai, tr. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957 & 1993), p. 504.

The relationship between spirituality and secularism that others dismissed as paradoxical, inconsistent, heretical, or even incoherent, Rousseau believed was true and necessary to send us down a more virtuous path. The urgent necessity with which he wrote, with which he engaged a world that so discomforted him, with which he proclaimed his species' innocence despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, suggests nothing less.

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